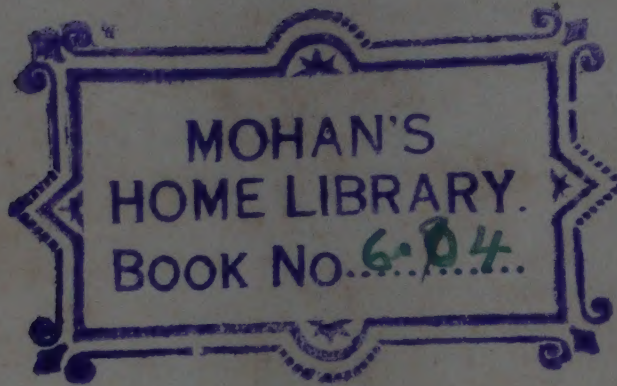


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THE OVAL TABLE

A **CRIME CLUB** *Novel*

5164

A Crime Club Story

IT WAS grimly appropriate that thirteen should sit down to dine on the night John Coleby ate his last meal on earth. But it was Coleby himself who had arranged the details of that dinner party. Even the name-cards set carefully to indicate the chair of each guest took the form of tiny skulls mounted on slender ebony pedestals, and the white lilies in the centre-piece gave a funereal air to what surely was intended as a festive board. A grim joke with a grimmer ending! Mr. Farjeon is an acknowledged master of mystery and he packs his story with a full load of excitement.

By the Same Author

PERIL IN THE PYRENEES

BLACK CASTLE

GREEN MASK THE HOUSE OF SHADOWS

THE JUDGE SUMS UP THE THIRD VICTIM

ROOM NUMBER SIX AUNT SUNDAY SEES IT THROUGH

MYSTERY UNDERGROUND MOUNTAIN MYSTERY

OLD MAN MYSTERY THE WINDMILL MYSTERY

SINISTER INN THE "Z" MURDERS YELLOW DEVIL

MYSTERY ON THE MOON MYSTERY OF THE CREEK

THE HOUSE OPPOSITE MURDERER'S TRAIL

BEN SEES IT THROUGH DANGEROUS BEAUTY

LITTLE GOD BEN TRUNK CALL DETECTIVE BEN

THIRTEEN GUESTS FANCY DRESS BALL

DARK LADY DEAD MAN'S HEATH SEVEN DEAD

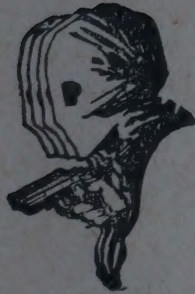
HOLIDAY AT HALF MAST MYSTERY IN WHITE

END OF AN AUTHOR EXIT JOHN HORTON

THE OVAL TABLE

by

J. JEFFERSON FARJEON



Published for

THE CRIME CLUB

by COLLINS 14 ST. JAMES'S PLACE,

LONDON

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CHAPTER ONE

END OF A JOURNEY

LEONARD BOYD was one of the thirteen people who sat round John Coleby's dining-table at the last meal he ever ate. It was a large table, oval in shape, and where visible its dark polished surface reflected the wine glasses, the dishes, the cruets, a tall silver vase containing white lilies, the amber glow of the electric chandelier, and, at times, the faces of the diners themselves as they bent forward or turned to one side or the other, making an uneasy moving pattern of pale inverted ghosts. But on this particular night the most ghostly things reflected in the table's surface were thirteen little skulls mounted on slender ebony pedestals holding the thirteen name-cards in their teeth.

These skulls gave an unpleasantly symbolic character to the white lilies in the tall silver vase.

The dinner was timed for eight ; but when, three and a half hours before the fatal meal, Leonard stepped out of the London train on to the platform of Ricester station, he had not the slightest idea that he was going to be invited to it. He did not even know where Leak Hall was, or its distance from the station, and he had to ask a porter.

"Leak Hall?" repeated the porter. "That'd be Mr. John Coleby's place."

"Yes, that's the name," answered Leonard. "Is it far?"

"For a walk it is," replied the porter. "About seven miles. But there's a taxi over there."

Leonard looked towards the taxi. The driver had just missed a chance with a haughty Irvingesque individual, and he returned Leonard's gaze with hopefully raised eyebrows. About to accept the invitation, Leonard suddenly changed his mind and shook his head.

"I think I'll have a cup of tea first," he said to the porter. "That a hotel?"

"Yes, you can get a nice cup of tea there, sir," the porter informed him, intent on his tip. "I'll carry your bag in."

He seized the bag with determination—if the taximan had missed a chance he did not intend to miss his—and piloted the traveller to a grim grey building the bricks of which had become sodden with smoke breathed from an adjacent tunnel. They passed in beneath a blackened title superfluously proclaiming,

"Station Hotel," and as they entered a large bare tea-room and the porter made for a corner table by a window, he remarked facetiously, "Nice view of the track." It was a remark he had made to dozens of other travellers, to imply a sort of brotherhood of humour. He believed it helped business. On this occasion, coupled with a very small service, it produced sixpence. Not till some hours later did the porter discover it to be an Australian coin.

Leonard Boyd took his seat, and the porter was replaced by a waiter. The waiter had no sense of humour. He was as depressing as the hotel, which had doubtless drained him of any wit he may once have possessed.

"I'd like some tea," said Leonard.

"Tea for one?" queried the waiter.

"I don't see any other," remarked Leonard.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Never mind. O.K. Say, could I get a room here if I wanted?"

"For the night?"

"Well, that would be the idea."

"Yes, sir, we have rooms here," said the waiter, a little on his dignity.

"That's fine. I'll let you know later, when I've thought about it."

And there was, Leonard abruptly realised, a great deal to think about before he began his journey to Leak Hall: details, immediate arrangements, as well as general policy. He had been postponing these things all the way from London, and it was not like him to postpone things. Well, here he was, and they could be postponed no longer. They would have to be worked out.

He worked them out during the meal. After a period of mental laziness he concentrated so completely on his thoughts that small events around him occurred through a vague haze, only to be developed fully afterwards. His thoughts had body, but the waiter became two-dimensional. Two-dimensional, also, was a large red-faced man who entered the tea-room and, after a quick glance round, walked casually towards another corner and joined a human rat. Of course, it wasn't really a rat; nor, perhaps, was it particularly human; but that was the first half-developed impression made on Leonard by the little pale-cheeked fellow with sandy hair who formed the other's objective. Soon they were in low conversation. The red-faced man brought a piece of paper from his pocket and drew upon it.

Then, through the window with the view of the track,

Leonard vaguely saw another train draw in while he was drinking his third cup of tea. The long train darkened the scene, and out of a third-class compartment immediately opposite the window a young couple emerged. The girl was small, pretty, and light hair fluffed from under a neat blue straw hat. The man, also rather under medium height, had curly brown hair and a little moustache that did not quite suit him. As the girl left the train she tripped, and the man caught her quickly and patted her shoulder reassuringly. The porter darted towards them and seized their large suitcase. A moment later they passed out of view.

Leonard went on thinking. His expression was grave. Presently he stopped staring at the table-cloth, his thoughts diverted by a movement. The large red-faced man was leaving his table, and his loud check suit made a moving blot to the door. The pale-cheeked rat remained at the table, gazing glassily at nothing.

Leonard looked at his watch. It was a little after five. He beckoned the waiter, paid his bill, and asked to be shown a room. The waiter conducted him to a large-bosomed manageress, who in turn conducted him to a small room immediately over the mouth of the tunnel.

"So this is England!" murmured Leonard, as the door closed upon him.

He spent twenty minutes over his toilet. He did not unpack his bag, but before he left he opened it and took out a faded photograph of a woman. A young woman, with rather tired but very sweet eyes. He stared at it intently, then shook his head, and slipped it in the breast pocket of his overcoat.

The porter was standing outside the hotel, enjoying a breather between trains, and he smiled at Leonard as at an old friend.

"Afraid you've missed it," he said.

"Missed what?" Leonard inquired.

"The taxi, sir," explained the porter. "It was took about half an hour ago, and it ain't come back yet."

"And there's not another?"

The porter shook his head. "There's only the one."

"Then I'll have to walk," said Leonard. "It won't hurt me. It's a fine evening."

The porter directed him, wished him luck as though he would need it, and he set off.

He soon found that he was glad to be walking, for the crisp autumn air and the long shadows made his progress pleasant once he had shaken off the town, and when after about ten minutes he met the taxi returning from its trip he refused, to

the driver's disappointment, the opportunity to take it. But it was not only the keen air and the velvet shadows that inclined him to prolong this final stage of a twelve thousand miles journey. Leak Hall was his objective. It had drawn him through great spaces of land and sea like an invisible magnet. But now he discovered that his progress towards his goal was being marred by a strange unwillingness, an unwillingness that replaced and was in odd contrast to his earlier impatience. "If I had taken that taxi," he reflected, "I might have arrived by now—at this very moment John Coleby and I might be looking at each other. But, instead, here I am, walking through these peaceful lanes!"

The meeting with John Coleby, however, would come. And it was, after all, of his own seeking.

He was walking towards the east. His grotesquely elongated shadow slid ahead of him like a peripatetic signpost, darkly pointing the way. The low rays of the setting sun warmed his back while the cool evening air played upon his face, waiting to claim him entirely. The tops of the autumn-brown hedges glowed with a swift unnatural brilliance in the final light of the day, as mountain peaks glow while the valleys are already filled with shadow. On either side of him, they formed bright tracks between which he walked. "Why can't this go on for ever?" he thought. Then the tracks began to lose their brightness; his elongated shadow, stretching too ambitiously into the future, lost its clearly-defined edges and began to smudge out in the greying surface of the road; his back felt suddenly cool.

With the first definite indications of approaching night came dark, disturbing thoughts, reminding him uneasily that he had not completed his programme in full detail even yet. There were still unanswered questions, questions he had shoved aside as being trivial and unimportant compared with the main issue. The answers, indeed, depended upon how the main issue shaped itself. So why worry about them now? Yet they persisted, revolving round his mind like little bits of grit in an otherwise smoothly-running engine. Afterwards? What afterwards? Would he return along this road—or not? Would he use that dingy unpalatable room over the smoky railway tunnel—or not? Would he . . .

He became conscious of a swift chugging sound behind him. He would have noted it before but for his absorption in his thoughts. He leapt aside, and a speeding motor-cycle missed him by inches. He stared after it angrily. A moment ago it had been so close that the impression of a long narrow nose and prominent ears had been thrust upon him, like a sudden un-

wanted fact thrown at him freakishly by an instant of Time. And two figures were interwoven with the fact ; 99. But now the nose, the ears, the figures, and the machine bearing them were just a vanishing dot. And now they were gone, with no evidence beyond a faint line in the dusty road that they had ever been.

“ Someone’s in a hurry ! ” thought Leonard.

He stared at the road, and visualised his unconscious body lying upon it, as it might have been—probably would have been—but for that flying leap. His body in the road. His soul, if one possessed a soul—where? The riddle of existence solved, or just more impenetrable blankness? But, oddly, in this fruitless vision of what might have been, he thought more about John Coleby’s future than about his own. What difference had that flying leap made to the owner of Leak Hall?

Then he laughed.

“ I’m growing morbid ! ” he said aloud.

He took the photograph of the young woman with the tired sweet eyes from his overcoat pocket, smiled at it, replaced it, and continued on his way.

The sun went down. The russet hedges still held their colour, but the glow they contributed was now their own as they whispered and rustled in the evening breeze. A bird suddenly fluttered from a tree and swooped noisily away, disturbed by some unknown happening. In the east a small white cloud turned amber-pink, became a thing of joy for three minutes, then faded through grey to obliteration as the gloaming gradually deepened.

Leonard walked on in a sort of dream. It was all impossible. He ceased to believe it. He was thousands of miles away, imagining this walk, as in truth he had imagined it countless times. Yes, it had always been a walk. That must have been why he had refused the taxi. He had pictured himself walking, drawing closer and closer, when the whole thing had been just a teasing phantom of the mind. Of course, it was still this teasing phantom—it couldn’t be anything else—developed by some trick into the semblance of reality!

Then, as he came round a bend in the lane, reality swept back to him. Ahead, unmistakably, was Leak Hall.

CHAPTER TWO

THE THIRTEENTH PLACE

VIEWED as a first impression in the dimness of gloaming, Leak Hall formed a perfect setting for the grim events towards which thirteen people were moving. Its ghostly outlines spoke of a dead past which even the lights on either side of the square front porch were unable to dispel. The walls rose stiffly from a surround of inky space. The windows, obedient to the stern design, offered no alleviation. There was a queer dank smell that both intrigued and worried the nostrils. It rose, Leonard discovered later, from a deep moat that ran completely round the house, spanned periodically by narrow brick bridges. A wider bridge led across the water to the front porch and to a studded oak door.

He stood for a full minute, staring at it. Here, at long last, was journey's end. The point had been reached, and all that now remained was to walk across that bridge and ring the bell! So—what was he waiting for?

He took a breath, passed through a wooden gate in a thick low hedge of whispering leaves, and reached the studded oak door. As he pressed the bell he felt as though he were ringing up a curtain.

A grey-haired butler opened the door. A thin man, as solemn as his surroundings. He gave an impression of concealed surprise, the surprise held back by tradition and training.

"Is Mr. Coleby at home?" asked Lionel, driving without preamble to the point.

"Mr. Coleby?" repeated the butler, as though he were not quite sure.

Leonard knew from the man's manner that, for some obscure reason of his own, he was merely gaining time before committing himself to a statement.

"Yes, Mr. John Coleby," said Leonard. "This is Leak Hall?"

That question should have come first, yet oddly enough he had never been in any doubt about it.

"Yes, sir, this is Leak Hall," the butler answered. "Er—have you an appointment?"

"No."

"What name, sir?"

Now it was Leonard's turn to hesitate.

"Leonard Boyd," he said.

The butler's face, covertly watched by the visitor, registered nothing.

You have a card, sir?

Afraid not."

Now the butler paused without any dissimulation. He was considering some matter, implying wordlessly that the time was not very convenient. Leonard maintained an unhelpful silence. The time might not be convenient, but he was not in a humour to turn round and walk back to Ricester without a very solid reason. His humour hardened, not too reasonably, as he felt the house trying to push him out.

"I'm not sure——" began the butler.

"When a man is not sure, the obvious thing is to find out," Leonard cut in. "Isn't it?"

Leonard's sharp tone, as well as his words, shocked the butler into decision. In a voice bearing the maximum offence permitted to a good servant, the butler said, "Step inside, sir," and as the visitor did so closed the front door and turned to a door on the left of the long wide hall.

Leonard moved towards the door, which was ajar. The butler pushed it wide, then vanished in the direction of the staircase. Leonard entered the room, expecting to find it empty. But it was not. A tall, rather lean man swung round jerkily, moved quickly forward, and abruptly stopped.

"Sorry if I made you jump," said Leonard, while thinking, "Where have I seen you before?"

The tall lean man frowned at him.

"It is not my habit, young man," he remarked, heavily, "to jump."

"One can break a habit," replied Leonard, pleasantly; "but I'm glad I was mistaken."

Where *had* he seen him before? Recently—it must have been recently. Was it the man on the motor-bike, who had nearly run over him? In that case, to make him jump would merely be to return a compliment. No, it was not the man on the motor-bike. This fellow's nose was not long and narrow, nor had he prominent ears. Yet Leonard was certain he had seen him since his arrival at Ricester. And then, all at once, as he recalled the occasion, he found that he had only seen one side of his face before. The other side had an ugly scar.

It was the Irvingesque individual who had refused the taxi at the station just before Leonard had refused it himself.

"Is one of *your* habits," inquired the man, "to stare?"

It did not suit Leonard to engage in a quarrel.

"We've got off with each other on the wrong foot, I reckon," he answered. "How about making a fresh start? My name's—Leonard Boyd."

"I do not know it."

"You weren't supposed to. Any more, I expect, than I'm supposed to know yours."

A queer light suddenly gleamed in the other's eyes. Impulsively he exclaimed, "There was a time, my boy, when you would have known it!" and then seemed to regret the impulse.

"May I know it now?" inquired Leonard, curiously.

"Why not?" communed the strange fellow. "Why not? My name is Rodney Forsyth."

His eyes bored into Leonard. He spoke as though he were delivering important news.

"Sounds sort of familiar," lied Leonard, to oblige him.

"Sort of familiar," repeated Forsyth, with ponderous irony. "Sort of familiar! The name of Rodney Forsyth sounds sort of familiar!"

"Perhaps I should mention that I've spent all my life in Australia," said Leonard.

"Twenty years ago I was in Australia," answered Forsyth. "But, of course, those were early days. I had not yet played Hamlet at the Haymarket. 'To be, or not to be!' Eh? 'The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune!' Eh? 'To die—to sleep—no more!' 'The spurns——'" His voice began to shake. "'The spurns, that patient merit of the unworthy takes!' But you are not interested. The name—as you say—is sort of familiar!"

He shrugged and, turning away, strode to a cabinet against a wall and began studying the ornaments. Leonard decided not to pursue the unprofitable conversation. He had not come all the way from Australia to waste emotion on an actor past his heyday. Nevertheless, Rodney Forsyth erred when he suggested that Leonard Boyd was not interested. He was very interested. He was interested in everything. And particularly in Rodney Forsyth's scar.

"Yes, and why," he wondered, "didn't he take that taxi?"

A minute later, the people who had taken the taxi came into the drawing-room. Leonard had also seen them before. They were the young couple who had alighted from the train just outside his window while he had been sitting at tea.

They were in evening clothes, the girl in rather fluffy light blue, the man in a well-cut suit. Leonard began to feel a little uncomfortable. He wished the butler would return with a message, and began to sympathise with the servant's attitude.

Rodney Forsyth was in a dinner jacket, also well-cut but showing signs of long wear, and Leonard now realised that a party was on.

"Oh! We're not the first!" exclaimed the girl, with nervous vivacity.

"Good-evening, everybody," said the young man. His gaiety sounded equally forced.

Forsyth made no response. He paid, in fact, no attention whatever to their arrival, keeping his back turned to them as he continued examining the ornaments with exaggerated interest. It was Leonard who, after an embarrassing little silence, responded:

"Good-evening. Excuse my clothes. I'm afraid I'm gate-crashing."

The newcomers exchanged glances.

"What—haven't you been invited?" asked the girl.

Leonard shook his head.

"Is this a party?" he inquired.

The reply came, unexpectedly, from the ornament cabinet.

"A party? A command performance! The guests respond to their cues!" Forsyth turned theatrically, presenting to Leonard the scarred side of his face. "All the world is a stage, Mr. Boyd. You have—I take it—at least heard of Shakespeare?"

Leonard frowned as Forsyth swung back to the cabinet. He disliked the actor intensely. He disliked the whole situation, which did not conform with anything he had anticipated. He disliked his own part in it, and called himself a blunderer. When would that confounded butler return?

The young couple melted away to a couch near a generous log fire—the one congenial thing in the room—and conversed in whispers. Leonard walked to a window, not because he had any interest in the window, but just for something to do. There were four windows, the two largest being at either end of the room which ran the complete length of the building from front to back. The two smaller windows were on each side of the large marble fireplace. Leonard chose the window that was nearest to him, and parting the curtains slightly, looked down at the faintly visible moat.

"Excuse me, sir," said a voice behind him.

He turned, and saw with relief that it was the butler.

"I reckon I'd better call another time," he suggested. "I've butted in here at a bad moment."

"Mr. Coleby requests you to remain," was the butler's rather unexpected response.

"Oh! He can see me?"

"He requests you to remain," repeated the butler, like a parrot that confines its conversation to what it has heard or been taught.

"Yes, I heard you the first time," retorted Leonard, nettled. "But that doesn't answer my question."

"I expect Mr. Coleby will see you shortly, sir," prophesied the butler.

"What about his guests?"

"I have given you the message, sir."

"Yes, I know, but—well, where shall I wait? I'm in the way here."

The butler answered patiently, his patience a little too obvious:

"No, sir, you're not in the way—so I understand."

In the last three words and the tone in which they were uttered was an implication that, although the situation was as he had stated, the visitor's assumption had not been entirely unreasonable.

"Very well," said Leonard, "but if I am to wait here I think I'd like to wash. I'm pretty dusty from travelling."

The request was too reasonable to refuse, but Leonard felt that the unhelpful butler would have refused it with pleasure if he could have found a logical motive for doing so. Leonard's own motive was less to get clean than to escape from the frigid atmosphere of the drawing-room.

The butler led the way back into the hall. The dark wood panels refracted a heavy gleam from the little red-shaded electric bulbs along the walls. A door on the opposite side evidently led to the dining-room, for a maid went in a moment before they passed with a trayful of small plates. She looked scared, as though fearing she would drop the tray, but Leonard deduced later that this had not been her reason. There was no other door on that side. The panelled walls extended from the dining-room door to their termination broken only by the periodic red lights and heavily-framed reproductions of "Marriage à la Mode." On the drawing-room, the left-hand side, was the beginning of a wide ascending staircase. It was an unusual staircase, for a portion of the width nearest the wall was boarded over to make a smooth carpeted slope. Beside the staircase the narrowed passage continued past the doors of three understairs cupboards, of increasing size, to the top of a lower staircase descending darkly to the basement. Straight ahead was a large cloakroom.

"In there, sir," said the butler.

"Thank you," answered Leonard. "Quite a journey."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Good Lord, can't one make an ordinary remark without being frozen!" thought Leonard as he snapped back, "This cloakroom ought to have been built at the other end."

The butler suffered the comment without adding one of his own, turned, and vanished solemnly down the basement stairs.

Leonard did not hurry his ablutions. It was too enjoyable being all by oneself again. Hanging his overcoat on a hook, one of a long row which already contained two other coats, he spent ten minutes washing, brushing, and pondering. He knew he had made a mistake in calling "out of the blue" at this hour. He should have ascertained the situation in advance, or left his visit till the morning. But it was too late now to retract. He was requested to remain. Well—so be it!

Before he left the cloakroom he heard the hall clock strike the half-hour. Half-past seven. He recalled that he had heard it strike the quarter-hour while in the drawing-room, and he wondered how many more times he would hear the queer jangling chime. He did not know that the hall clock was destined to chime indelibly in his memory.

As he left the cloakroom he heard a quick patter of feet, and nearly bumped into a woman at the foot of the stairs. She had descended hurriedly, and she gave him a swift sharp look as he stopped abruptly to avoid the collision. He thought she seemed puzzled, but he only saw her for an instant. The next moment she had disappeared into the dining-room.

A new arrival was in the hall. The butler was taking his hat and coat, and Leonard received another surprise. The new arrival was the large red-faced man who had joined the human rat in the hotel tea-room. Leonard recognised him immediately, but he did not recognise Leonard, staring at him over the butler's shoulder with aggressive curiosity.

"What? Aren't we dressing?" he exclaimed to the butler. "I wasn't told——"

"The guests are all dressed, sir," replied the butler, soothingly.

"Oh! Then that's all right. Where's a damn mirror?" Dismissing Leonard's inappropriate lounge suit under the assumption that in due course it would dismiss itself, he strode to a small mirror by the drawing-room door, adjusted a white tie that needed the attention, and then walked into the drawing-room. None of the guests, apparently, was being announced. There was neither host nor hostess to announce them to.

"Is it a large party?" Leonard inquired of the butler.

"Quite a number are coming, sir," replied the butler.

For the first time Leonard wondered whether the butler

were quite sure of himself as he sounded. He did not know why he wondered it, or why he suddenly thought of the parlourmaid with the tray of plates.

"What time is the dinner?"

"Eight, sir."

Leonard glanced at the clock. It was twenty-four minutes to the hour. Some of the guests seemed to have arrived unfashionably early.

"Mr. Coleby is not giving himself much time to see me," he remarked. "Do you think a reminder might be a good idea?"

"Mr. Coleby, sir," answered the butler, "never needs to be reminded of anything."

"Really? Thanks. I say, you don't like me very much, do you?"

The butler did not reply to the challenge. He turned slightly pink, and then made for the cloakroom with the red-faced man's hat and coat.

The newcomer had shoved the drawing-room door wide, and Leonard looked in. The young man was rising from the couch.

"Oh! Hallo, Mr. Rutter," he exclaimed. "I—I didn't know you were coming."

"Or you wouldn't have come yourself, eh?" replied Rutter, unpleasantly humorous. "'Evening, Mrs. Coleby. Well, there's a good fire, anyway!"

Mrs. Coleby? Leonard's interest quickened. Surely—impossible!

Rutter glanced towards the far end of the room, where the actor Forsyth was pacing slowly up and down. "Who's that?" he asked, dropping his voice as he moved towards the fire.

"I've no idea," replied the young man.

"Do you know what I think?" said Rutter. "We're in for a jolly evening!"

Then the front door bell rang again, mingling with the three-quarters chime of the hall clock, and for the next ten minutes there was an uncomfortable confusion of more arriving guests. It was not until a little later that Leonard sorted them all out, but from his preliminary glimpses of their outward appearance he gathered that they comprised a clergyman and his wife, a Scotsman and his daughter, and—last, and very possibly least—the human rat.

One point made a very definite impression on him. If he himself did not feel comfortable, nor did anybody else. Some of the guests knew each other, some were strangers, and the general atmosphere was one of frigid awkwardness which even the blazing fire was unable to thaw. Periods of grim silence were neurotically intersected by other periods of elaborate

vivacity which betrayed its falseness by its excess. After these patent failures, the returns to silence seemed grimmer than ever. The guests formed an ill-assorted orchestra without a conductor, or even, it seemed, a knowledge of their score. The clergyman's wife had a sudden choking fit. This, Leonard thought ironically, was the best thing that had happened so far. He maintained his own position at the doorway, on the outer fringe of it all, like a bather refusing to advance into the hidden currents of the tide.

He had another reason for remaining by the door. He wanted to keep an eye, also, on the hall, so that he would not miss the moment of John Coleby's delayed arrival. It was the clergyman's wife who deflected this plan. Her coughing fit took Leonard's attention from the passage, and he was unprepared for the voice that suddenly sounded behind him.

"Mr. Boyd?"

He turned quickly, and met the eyes of his host. Cynical eyes that drilled into his with a momentary intensity that almost hurt. Leonard hated him on sight. There was something sadistic in the gaze that held him. Yet if this man were callous to the tragedies of others, he possessed, Leonard read, a tragedy of his own. What that tragedy was he did not know, unless it were half a century's ignorance of the value of humanity, but even in this first moment of their meeting it touched him with an uneasy, contemptuous pity.

"Mr. Coleby?"

John Coleby nodded, then suddenly, and it seemed designedly, lessened the intensity of his gaze and glanced beyond Leonard into the drawing-room.

"Well? Are we all here?" he called.

His voice had an electrical effect. The clergyman's wife stopped coughing through shock. More than half the company started before they turned. The exceptions were the Scotsman and his daughter. For an instant, as these two turned, the girl's eyes rested on Leonard.

It was the red-faced Rutter who replied. He did not look well in evening clothes, and his bulging boiled shirt gave an impression that it was waiting to burst. The loud check suit in which Leonard had first seen him had been a far more appropriate covering.

"Ah! Good-evening, Coleby," said Rutter. "Is there to be a roll call?"

Always that unpleasant humour which seeks unsuccessfully to conceal some inner nastiness.

"A roll call is unnecessary," replied Coleby. "I have seen already that one is missing. Hasn't Codrington arrived?"

"If he had, would he be missing?" inquired Rutter.

"I see you are going to be in great form to-night," answered Coleby, unruffled. "It is four minutes to eight. The invitation said seven-forty-five for eight o'clock."

"Invitation?" queried Rutter.

The Scotsman asked, in a deep solid voice:

"And are ye reprimanding us the noo for the fault of another?"

"That is not necessary, Mr. MacPherson," responded Coleby, "when we all possess sufficient faults of our own. But unpunctuality has never been one of my faults. The meal cannot wait."

"Well, that suits me, Uncle," exclaimed the young man on the couch. "I'm ravenous!"

"I trust your appetite will be sufficiently maintained to the finish," returned John Coleby, dryly. "Meanwhile, if Codrington does not turn up, who is going to occupy the thirteenth chair?"

"Eh? Thirteen?" jerked the clergyman.

Coleby's eyes returned to Leonard.

"You have timed your call most opportunely, Mr. Boyd," he said.

"I didn't come to the party," replied Leonard.

"Just the same, I now invite you."

"I am not dressed."

"No one will object to that. On the contrary, you will help to show up our own smartness."

"I see," Leonard smiled. "And my own doesn't matter."

"But there may be another reason for your hesitation," said Coleby.

"You mean I may be superstitious!"

"You may be—afraid?"

Coleby's eyes smiled back at Leonard, and he knew he was being challenged. He knew, too, that other eyes were watching him with intense curiosity. Again he became momentarily conscious of the Scotsman's daughter.

"No, I'm not superstitious," he said. "Or afraid. But what is going to happen if Mr. Codrington—was that the name?—turns up?"

Coleman took out his watch, and for a minute there was silence. Then the clock in the hall gave its preliminary whirr and began chiming eight.

"It is settled," remarked Coleby, replacing his watch. "Mr. Codrington has not turned up."

CHAPTER THREE

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

Down the staircase, on the slope of the smooth boarded side, came a strange sight : the butler wheeling an invalid chair in which sat a motionless old man. The old man stared straight ahead of him with beady black eyes which were as motionless as his body. They moved neither to right nor left. They were as expressionless as the face in which they were set. And yet there was an uncanny sense of intelligence behind the fixed features ; something was going on behind that mask, a mobility of mind hidden from all but the invalid himself. Within the all but dead body lived still a virile spirit.

At the bottom of the stairs the butler deftly turned the chair towards the dining-room. The woman with whom Leonard had nearly collided after leaving the cloakroom was standing by the door, and she opened it wide as the chair approached. The old man was wheeled in.

John Coleby, who had turned to watch the invalid chair's progress, now turned back to his guests, who were moving with no enthusiasm towards the drawing-room door.

"One of the thirteen is already seated," he said. "Let us join him."

"Was that your father?" Leonard asked quietly.

"How did you guess?" inquired Coleby.

"I noticed a resemblance."

"And, although a stranger, are sufficiently interested in the family to remark on it. Have you made any further discoveries, Mr. Boyd, which you would like me to confirm?"

A formless procession was flowing by them. The young couple passed as he spoke.

"I heard that lady called Mrs. Coleby," said Leonard, when they had gone by.

"You were not led astray," answered John Coleby. "She is married to my nephew."

"Your nephew being the young man with her?"

"She has not, to my knowledge, yet started gadding about with anybody else. My nephew is Peter Coleby. Do you again mark a family resemblance?"

"Not this time."

"I confess I am relieved."

Nearly all the guests had left the drawing-room by now, but one still lingered. It was the human rat. Coleby addressed him.

"What's the matter, Snagg!" he asked. "Have you lost something?"

"Eh? No, sir," answered the fellow, with a gulp. "I was just—I'm coming."

"You will find your place near the door, Snagg," Coleby went on. "I thought you would like that. Between Miss MacPherson and Mr. Forsyth. I'm afraid you don't know either of them, but Mr. Rutter will be your *vis-a-vis*—I think you know Mr. Rutter?"

"What? Yes. Thank you," muttered the miserable man, and dived past them.

Coleby looked after him with unfeigned contempt.

"We are a somewhat mixed company, Mr. Boyd," he said, "but I think I can promise you an entertaining evening. Of course you will not find your name on any of the cards, but you will take the place marked Gerald Codrington. That will be on the side of the room you enter. Turn immediately to your right along the wall. You are between Mr. Forsyth and Mr. MacPherson—I am sorry I cannot give you a lady, but there are not enough to go round."

"You seem to have everything taped," observed Leonard,

"Believe me, Mr. Boyd," answered Coleby, "I have everything taped—everything."

But when he said "everything," Leonard felt that he meant "everybody."

Of the many strange moments that punctuated that strangest of evenings, none were more weird to Leonard than his first moments in the dining-room. With the exception of his host he was the last to enter, and he had vaguely expected to find every one seated. But no one was seated, saving the paralysed old man in the invalid chair. The guests around the long oval table stood in uncomfortable, unsorted groups, hardly able to credit the macabre spectacle at which they stared, and looking themselves, in the dim amber glow of the electric chandelier, like half-formed ghosts. They stared at the thirteen little ebony-mounted skulls bearing the thirteen name-cards in their grinning teeth. They stared at the glass salt-cellars shaped like coffins. They stared at the tall white lilies that rose from the middle of the table and formed a funereal centrepiece. Small wonder, thought Leonard, that the parlour-maid with the tray had looked agitated when walking into this room!

It was the guests themselves, however, who seemed to

Leonard the most spectral. They might have been statues, waiting for some satanic wand to touch them into movement. A memory of queer music which he could not place came into Leonard's ears. Disturbing. Unsettling. Full of repressed feeling, of captive emotion, presently to be released. The prelude to a waking nightmare. It was the opening to Ravel's *La Valse*.

All at once one of the statues came to life. Rutter's voice boomed out of the silence.

"Is this your idea of a joke, Coleby?"

"Evidently it is not yours," replied Coleby.

"No, by God, it's not!" exclaimed Rutter.

"In that case, Rutter," asked Coleby, "why don't you go home?" Rutter's red face grew redder as Coleby turned away from him with unconcealed contempt, and continued, now addressing the company, "Well, ladies and gentlemen, what are we waiting for? Find your places. It is not proposed that we drink our soup standing."

The words were followed by a swift resumption of arrested movement, movement as sudden as a fluttering breeze that rises out of the stillness before a storm. The guests surged towards their seats, identifying them by the abominable little name-cards. "Your place is here," said a skull to each. As Leonard turned to the right along the wall to find his own place, he discovered that he was noting and registering facts with a queer uncanny prescience. The process began subconsciously, then developed from an instinct into awareness. He was as certain as though he had been told that, before the evening was over, he would need to call upon all the store of knowledge he had been able to accumulate; and this was the time—here, now—to accumulate it.

Everything seemed important. Even the configuration of the room. It was a large room, wider than the drawing-room but not as long. The oval table stretched along the side nearest the door, with a space between the backs of the chairs and the wall of four or five feet. This seemed an odd arrangement, for surely it would have been better had the table been in the middle of the room. One end of the table, the end where the invalid chair was stationed with its back to an electric fire, was near the door to the hall; the other end terminated some three yards from the opposite wall, to the right of a big window. Another window was in the centre of the next wall, and continuing round the corner of this wall one came to a second door, now closed, in line with the fireplace.

But while noting these things Leonard's main interest remained in his fellow guests, and after he had taken his seat

(considering the absent Mr. Cordington fortunate to be out of it), and the meal, served by the butler and the parlourmaid, had begun, his eye roamed round the table to gather further impressions. There were six people on his side and five on the other, with Coleby and his old father at either end. On Leonard's side, seated nearest the hall door and on the right of the invalid chair, was pretty Jenny MacPherson. Most of the names Leonard learned as the meal proceeded. Thus the youngest of the company sat next the oldest, as though incongruity were an essential ingredient of the occasion. Outwardly demure, she reflected the fearless independence of her race, and her hazel eyes often rested on Coleby's with a puzzled thoughtfulness. "All this is very perplexing and very troublesome," her expression said, "but I, for one, refuse to be agitated." She was, Leonard decided, the most composed person in the room—excluding John Coleby himself.

Next to her, on her right, a very nasty individual, and probably the least composed. The human rodent. A small man in an ill-fitting dinner-jacket; red-headed, ferret-eyed, with a humble bearing that thinly concealed both fear and hate. His name was Ted Snagg, but it might have been Uriah Heep. Next to him, the actor, Rodney Forsyth, a wreck of his former self. How had he got that ugly diagonal line across the right cheek? There was a slight disagreement, too, between his eyes. One eye, the left, was glass. Leonard noticed this suddenly when the actor turned in his direction to reach a salt-cellar and then abruptly changed his mind. The quickly withdrawn hand that had once gesticulated confidently on the stage was now unsteady. Forsyth . . . Rodney Forsyth. Hadn't Leonard seen some picture postcards of him once upon a time? But it must have been at a time before the actor had acquired his present disfigurements.

Next to Forsyth, Leonard himself. On Leonard's other side, Jenny's father, MacPherson. A big, powerful, sandy-haired man, this Scot. By his own admission across the table to the clergyman, a strict churchman, fearing God but none else. Next to him, striking another contrast, timid Phyllis Coleby, a nice little thing who had as yet displayed no particular quality.

Then, at the head of the table, John Coleby, at whom Leonard's gaze paused in its oval tour. Coleby's eyes were on the white lilies, whose tallness screened him from his father at the other end of the table, but Leonard received a queer impression that if Coleby was not seeing through the lilies, he was in some way establishing a contact with his father there, and that their lines of vision met. Leonard had never en-

countered a personality more satanic. He almost missed the horns.

The woman on Coleby's right—why was this woman in the place of honour?—gave a sudden little gasp, bringing Leonard's attention to her. It was the clergyman's wife—Mrs. Eldred Dixon. Middle-aged, not good-looking, with a hard severe face, though the face this evening appeared to have lost its customary control. An importance natural to her seemed to have dwindled. Her dark brown dress was expensive. It displayed little flesh but considerable price.

Next to her sat Peter Coleby, their host's nephew, a young man in his early twenties. No one would have guessed that these two came from the same family tree. The nephew's features were pleasant, and his brown eyes were sensitively friendly. The sort of man, Leonard guessed, who could quickly lose his temper, and as quickly regret it. Weak? Yes, probably. There was no firm will in the junior Coleby household as there so palpably was in the senior premises.

Next to him was the clergyman, the Rev. Eldred Dixon. He had light hair, light brown eyes, and high eyebrows. Even the sober serenity of his clerical collar did not prevent him from looking rather like a startled bird. Next to him, James Rutter. Large, stout, everything about him indicating a considerable acquaintance with the bottle. His coarse red face made a blot upon the scene, as though the artist had overdone the paint. His neck was thick, and there was something about the shape of his head, as well as a gleam in his too small eyes, that indicated the bully. Not a subtle bully interested in the artistry of his vice like John Coleby, but just a common bully who would enjoy twisting an arm. It was, however, a subdued and anxious bully who was now spooning up his soup from his plate.

Then—completing the five on the opposite side—came the woman into whom Leonard had nearly collided at the foot of the stairs. Her name, he learned presently, was Marion Lacey, and he watched her quietly with particular interest. Who was she? One felt that she did not occupy her rightful position at the table—that it should have been facing John Coleby's at the other end. She was not a guest; she was a resident. Tall, dark, and middle-aged, she still bore traces of an early allure, and by those feminine arts in which she was so clearly proficient she had managed to retain and restrain her figure. But one felt that perhaps she would not do so for much longer. She exuded a sort of hostile defiance of age which is only expressed in its shadow, and one saw just the beginnings of the battle. Gold loops were suspended from her ear-lobes. An

artist might have called his painting of her, "The Lady with the Ear-rings." What would a moralist have called her? "Not, I feel sure," reflected Leonard, "Coleby's house-keeper."

Completing the oval, old Adam Coleby occupied the position, though not the chair, which Leonard's instinct told him should have been Marion Lacey's. The high wheels of the chair seemed to dwarf the wasted body of the old man, though not his watchful spirit. Yes, the body had dwindled through disease, but the spirit—somehow or other, somewhere or other—remained intact. It seemed to be waiting . . . waiting . . .

The butler's hand intruded deftly between Leonard and MacPherson, and the former's empty soup plate was removed.

"Weell, Mr. Boyd," remarked the Scotsman, quietly, "we seem to hae survived the firrst course without any accident."

"Do you expect any accidents, then?" inquired Leonard.

MacPherson considered the question soberly. Then he responded:

"I'm nae prophet, Mr. Boyd. I've too much regard for my reputation as a man of sense. But I'm thinking there'll be nae harm this night in remembering one of our national slogans—Ca' canny!"

Leonard gave him a curious glance.

"Is that advice?" he asked.

"Ay, if you think you need it," answered MacPherson, "but who am I to ken that?"

A moment later an accident did happen. The butler dropped a soup plate, and Mrs. Dixon shrieked. But John Coleby, next to her, laughed.

"Et tu, Brute?" he said, looking at the butler amusedly. "Sure *you* have nothing to worry about?"

The butler, white with disgrace, stooped to regain the broken pieces and place them on the tray.

"Better not count them, William," went on Coleby. "They may number thirteen. By the way, I hope no one here is superstitious?"

"Superstitious?" exclaimed the vicar, in a nervous twitter. "No, certainly not! Certainly not!"

"I am reassured, though I did not expect the denial to come from you, Dixon."

"Eh? Why not?"

The vicar looked more like a startled bird than ever as he discovered himself drawn unwillingly into the conversation. An untidy wisp of light hair pointed upwards like a disarranged feather.

"Religion is based upon superstition," remarked Coleby.

MacPherson saved Dixon the trouble of finding a reply.

"I'm disagreeing with ye there," he interposed. "Religion is based upon faith in the Almighty."

"And what is superstition based on?"

"Fear of the Devil."

"Neither of which has ever been proved to be based on anything."

"Both of which are being proved every moment of every day and night. But I've nae fear of *you*, Mr. Coleby," added MacPherson, with an unexpected touch of his host's own sardonic humour.

"And I never quarrel with my guests," answered Coleby, smiling. "Let us—momentarily—lighten the conversation. Have you been to any theatres lately, Phyllis?"

The ridiculous question produced on the startled girl's mind a complete blank.

The second course came and went without any relief to the psychological atmosphere. During the third course of an otherwise irreproachable meal, several guests made desperate efforts to be gay. Phyllis Coleby embarked on a valiant attempt at small talk. Her husband across the table did the same. The Reverend Eldred Dixon began, but did not finish, a comment on a recent pronouncement by the Archbishop of Canterbury. John Rutter told a story the character of which might fittingly have drawn a further comment from the clergyman. All it drew was a faint titter, immediately regretted, from the red-haired Edward Snagg. Next to Snagg, impossibly placed for neighbourly conversation, Jenny MacPherson threw a few domestic observations across the table to Marion Lacey.

But all the efforts were vain. The cynical John Coleby at one end, his silent and motionless old father at the other—no attempt was made to feed the invalid who was evidently attending the occasion only for its entertainment—the funereal table decorations, the shaded lights, and other factors which, though hidden now from Leonard, were destined to be unfolded later, proved too much for the neurotic company, and the final course was eaten in almost complete silence—a silence that seemed all the more marked by contrast with the abortive conversation that had preceded it. It came now as a sort of admission of failure, and it was broken by only one observation, made by John Coleby himself as the meal ended.

"Queer—is it not—that Gerald Codrington has not come. I wonder what has kept him away?"

Leonard could have sworn that the abominable little skull bearing the name of the absent guest grinned at him. Without

knowing why he glanced towards Marion Lacey. Her eyes were glued on her glass.

Then John Coleby rose from his chair, and as though answering a cue the butler and the parlourmaid began refilling the wine-glasses. Each passed down one side of the long table, the butler taking the side nearest the door. When they had finished they left the room, but Coleby did not speak at once. He appeared to be enjoying the moment too much to hurry it, and he stood in silence while the atmosphere tightened all around him. Suddenly he cleared his throat. The clearing of his throat was like a conductor rapping with his baton.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE TOAST

"LADIES and gentlemen," began John Coleby, "we are about to drink a toast—the toast for which your glasses have just been refilled—and, in view of the nature of the toast, I am glad to be assured that nobody here is superstitious." He smiled acidly. "We are far too happy and sensible a company—are we not?—to be troubled by the unstable fancies of primitive beings. Are we not? Indeed, if it had been otherwise, if there had been the remotest chance that any single person here would be ill at ease, would I have arranged this little party upon its present lines? Perish the thought! Thirteen at table—white lilies as a centrepiece—death's-heads holding our very names as though inviting Fate to select one—these things do not worry us! We are in a mood to appreciate the joke—eh? I have only to look round this table and to recall the bright chatter that has enlivened it, to find the answer."

He paused to note the effect of his cynical words. "What the devil is he getting at?" Leonard wondered. He wondered, too, how far his own ignorance was shared. Coleby went on:

"After all, my good friends, what is death? Each of us must meet it. That is common knowledge, and all we do not know is the date and the form. Perhaps that is as well. Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise. Æschylus, for instance, would not have been comforted to know in advance that he was to be killed by the fall, from an eagle's claws, of a tortoise on his bald head. Do not laugh! Both Philomenes and Zeuxis died of laughter—the former at seeing an ass eat figs, the latter at one of his own paintings. If Louis VI had known

that a pig would one day run between the legs of his horse and cause a fatal accident, he would have lost all his enjoyment of pork. A certain Duke of Clarence was drowned in a butt of malmsey. Frederick Lewis, son of George II, died from the blow of a cricket ball. Anacreon was choked by a grape-stone. And, believe it or not, Agathocles was killed, at the age of ninety-five, by a toothpick. Perhaps the most surprising thing about that is that he needed a toothpick at that age. Not, one of these people, not one of them, had the remotest idea in advance of how they were going to die—any more than we sitting here have—and they were all the happier for it. Yes?" He looked across the table at Rutter, who was beginning to fidget. "You want to say something, James?"

"Only—only that I thought you were going to propose a toast," replied Rutter.

"I am going to propose a toast," answered Coleby. "These are just a few preliminary remarks."

"Do ye ken, now," inquired MacPherson, "whether any one has died from a superfluity of worrds?"

"To the best of my belief, the case has not been recorded."

"Then, mebbe, to-night we'll be making history, Mr. Coleby."

"It would not surprise me in the least—though it may not be precisely the kind of history, Mr. MacPherson, you appear to have in mind. Would that disappoint you?"

"It would disappoint me so much," admitted the Scotsman, solemnly, "that I'm thinking you could add me to that list of yours and I should die of it."

At the other end of the table, Jenny frowned. The Reverend Eldred Dixon swallowed rather audibly, and moistened his lips.

"Er—if I might be allowed to intrude a remark"—he began.

"We are always eager to hear anything from you," encouraged Coleby.

"Eh? Quite so. I mean——" He floundered miserably. Leonard could not conceive him in a pulpit. "That is to say—no matter."

"For God's sake, give us the damned toast!" burst out Rutter.

"By all means," replied Coleby, "though I imagine many of you will already have guessed it. We are going to drink a toast to Death."

A question broke the little silence that followed. It came from MacPherson.

"Whose?" he asked.

"I wish I could satisfy you," returned Coleby, "but not mine."

A sudden laugh sounded in Leonard's left ear. It came, very unpleasantly, from Rodney Forsyth. John Coleby fixed him with his eye.

"Are you forgetting Philomenes and Zeuxis, Mr. Forsyth?" he inquired.

"No, Mr. Coleby," answered the actor, loudly. "Perhaps you are?"

"What makes you suggest that?"

"It occurred to me, Mr. Coleby, that, in regard to your own future, you may share their ignorance."

Coleby nodded slowly. "This interests me greatly," he said. "Are you—like Mr. MacPherson—thirsting for my blood? Do you, in fact, possess greater knowledge than myself, and know the form my own death is intended to take?"

The Reverend Eldred Dixon made another effort:

"Really!" he spluttered. "I—I must protest——!"

Peter Coleby came to the vicar's assistance.

"Yes, aren't you carrying the joke a bit far, Uncle?" he exclaimed. "I'm sure none of us here are thirsting for your blood!"

"Well, that might not be the correct expression in the majority of cases," John Coleby conceded, "but I am not flattering myself that if, say, I were buried to-morrow, my coffin would be overweighted with flowers. And one person present, Peter, is undoubtedly thirsting for my blood. That, if you all want to know it, is the reason for this little dinner party."

Marion Lacey had been sitting very still. She had hardly spoken during the whole meal. Now something inside her snapped, and as she turned her head the gold loops in her ears developed sudden agitated movement.

"John, you're being ridiculous!" she cried, sharply.

"Oh, no, my dear Marion, I am not," retorted Coleby, "and *you* know perfectly well that I am not. I may be many things, but the one thing I have successfully avoided all my life is to be ridiculous."

"Would ye explain, then?" proposed MacPherson.

"I am about to explain," said Coleby, and took a folded sheet of paper from his pocket. "Or this anonymous note will perhaps do it for me." He turned to his right and handed it to Mrs. Dixon, who took it unwillingly. "Read it, please, and pass it on. Let every one read it."

The communication, which was typewritten, did not take long to read, and it had completed its journey round the table

in sixty seconds. Some of the guests indeed did not seem to read it at all, passing it on to their neighbours as though it had been a hot brick. It was a fifteen-words message, and it ran :

*" You are a devil, and you
are going to die for it !
Say your prayers."*

" Crude, but to the point," commented Coleby, as he received the sheet back from his nephew's wife, " and you yourself, Phyllis, could not have typed it more neatly. More than one person here might make a pious statement in such terms, but the crudeness of the message is unimportant, since even those with a less dramatic phraseology could have subtly camouflaged their normal style, as the typewriter was used to camouflage the handwriting. No, the particular wording means nothing. It is the intention behind the words that interests me."

" If ye were worried," asked MacPherson, " why did ye no go to the police ? "

" Have I said I was worried ? " replied Coleby. " The term I used was ' interested,' and that being so, I prefer my own method of finding the solution—the method, in short, I am now adopting. Now you yourself, Mr. MacPherson, have no particular fondness for me."

" If ye'll no mind plain speaking, ye've never said a truer word than that, Mr. Coleby," agreed the Scotsman, " but I dinna put a bullet through every man I'm no keen on. If I did, I'd be busy."

" Let us continue the plain speaking. I recall an occasion when you threatened to put a bullet through me. But perhaps that was just a little Highland fancy ? Scotsmen like to hear themselves talk. Perhaps you did not really mean it—eh ? "

Colour mounted to MacPherson's cheeks, and he glanced towards his daughter at the other end of the table. Her colour had also increased, but only slightly. She did not lower her eyes, but kept them on Coleby's face.

" I didna do it," said MacPherson, " but I might have."

Coleby smiled, and turned to the girl who separated him from the speaker.

" From your expression, you appear to approve, Phyllis," he observed.

" I'm not going to be drawn into this ! " responded Phyllis quickly. The spirit in her voice could not keep out the fear

that inspired it. "This is nothing to do with me—not with me or with Peter!"

"Suppose you let Peter speak for himself?" suggested Coleby.

"Certainly I'll speak for myself, sir," Peter retorted. "A year ago you made me feel definitely homicidal—I'm admitting it—but——"

"Yes?"

"Well—aren't we patching that—that little affair up?"

"Are we?"

The young man frowned, and a sudden look of desperation came into his eyes. He half-rose, then after a glance at his wife sat down again.

"You sent this invitation," he muttered.

"And you accepted it," answered Coleby.

"Exactly."

"Yes. Exactly."

"Look here! If you insist on talking about these things—are you accusing——?"

"Accusing?" interrupted Coleby, his eyebrows mounting in feigned surprise. "Accusing, Peter? How sensitive we are all getting! I have not surely accused anybody—yet. Not even you, Mr. Dixon."

"What's that?" jerked the vicar.

"I merely mentioned that I had not accused you, Mr. Dixon," replied Coleby. "Why should I?"

"Really! This is most—I—really, I have no idea what you are talking about!"

"Of course not! That is so evident. And your wife, I am sure, shares your profound ignorance."

He turned to her, but she refused to meet his gaze. She swayed slightly, then gripped the edge of the table with tense fingers to steady herself.

MacPherson interposed.

"We all ken what our host is talking about," he said. "He is talking about an anonymous threat he has received, and he is proposing that one of us here is responsible for it."

"That is correct," corroborated Coleby. "The person who wrote that threat, or who caused it to be written, is in this room."

"You seem sure of that."

"I am quite sure of it. He—or she—is sitting at this table now, listening to my words. I excluded no one from my invitation list who could come under suspicion."

His eyes roamed slowly round the table, and paused at Leonard Boyd.

"I received no invitation when this dinner was planned," said Leonard, "so if I come under suspicion, you excluded me."

"I am interested that you should point that out," replied Coleby.

"It was fairly obvious."

"Rot! Of course it was!" exclaimed Rutter. His small eyes, which had gone flat, assumed a sudden aggressiveness. "You're talking through your hat! I can tell you something else that's obvious!"

"What?"

"Why, there's somebody could have written that damned note who *wasn't* excluded, though *he* isn't here. Codrington!"

"Ah! I wondered which of you would draw my attention to that."

"And I'll draw your attention to something else," went on Rutter, vehemently. "You're too hipped on motives. Haven't you ever heard of a lunatic?"

"I have both heard of them and met them," replied Coleby, staring at him rudely.

"Very funny—if you mean it to be! But I wasn't referring to present company!"

"Did I imply that I was? Only if you mean, Rutter, that this threat may have been sent to me by somebody I have never met, and who picked out my name with a pin, I am afraid I cannot take your suggestion very seriously."

The man with the scarred face raised his eyes. The long diagonal scar across his cheek seemed to become more livid, and the glass eye more apparent, as he spoke with controlled emotion.

"Is there anybody here?" he asked, heavily, "who regards *me* as a lunatic? I think I should take that suggestion very seriously indeed."

"Oh, come!" murmured the small ferrety man next to him. "Gentlemen!"

Coleby transferred his gaze, and regarded the speaker coldly.

"We all know your pacific nature, Snagg," he said. "We know that your whole life has been devoted to brotherhood and love. Both Mr. Rutter and I—your former and your present employer—have had ample opportunity to study your—particular qualities. But there is no need for you to pour oil on troubled waters here. Nor, surely, was there any need for Mr. Forsyth to assume that any of us regarded him as a lunatic. He may in the past have acted the rôle of a madman on the stage, but in real life—to quote our friend Snagg—come, gentlemen, come! And now perhaps you will all spare

me further interruptions. They savour too much of uneasy consciences—and, after all, we do not want to suspect the wrong man—or woman. Let me finish what I have to say. It will not take long. The toast we are about to drink is to the at present unknown individual who plans to take my life, and since that individual may be said to personify death, this is a toast to death. When Theramenes was condemned by the Thirty Tyrants to drink hemlock, he said to the man who had condemned him—he said——” For the first time, John Coleby faltered. A shade of annoyance crossed his features. “One moment. The words will come to me.” But, apparently, they did not. He shrugged his shoulders with a little smile. “Excuse me for a minute. I think there is a book in the library that will give me the quotation.”

His hand had moved towards his glass. He now withdrew the hand, and pushed back his chair.

“Are ye no’ scared to leave the room?” asked MacPherson.

“Scared? Why should I be scared?” answered Coleby, pausing.

“Weell, mebbe ’tis not for me to say,” responded MacPherson, “but if I were in your shoes, I’d tak’ my glass with me!”

“Now might I do it pat,’ eh?” Coleby looked at MacPherson fixedly, then shook his head and laughed. Many of his guests remembered that laugh. “I’m no’ scared, Mr. MacPherson,” he went on, imitating the Scotsman’s accent, “for there’s safety in numbers, do ye ken, and if any one in this room tries to tamper with my glass while I am out of it, there will be eleven very eager witnesses to give evidence against the offender. Including my father at the other end—who misses nothing, and would, I am sure, be ready to tip me a wink. Eh, Dad? Still, Mr. MacPherson, I’m obleeged to ye for the warning!”

Then, with a malicious chuckle, he left the table.

He had to pass behind five chairs to reach the library door on the right of the fireplace—the chairs of Mrs. Dixon, Peter Coleby, the vicar, James Rutter, and Marion Lacey, in that order. Thus Marion Lacey was nearest the door to the library, as Jenny MacPherson, seated on the other side of the invalid chair, was nearest to the door into the hall. The position occupied by each guest during the next eight minutes became of subsequent importance. Leonard recalled afterwards the almost insolent deliberation with which John Coleby made the journey to the library. It provided another period of suspense which, in his sardonic mood, he chose to expand to its fullest. Leonard recalled other things—how Mrs. Dixon’s fingers came

away from the table-edge she had been gripping, wavered, and then grasped the edge again as though to prevent herself from falling—how Phyllis Coleby, separated from her only by Coleby's now empty chair, watched her with a sort of unwilling fascination—how heavy sweat made glistening beads on the forehead of James Rutter—how still Marion Lacey's gold ear-rings were—as still as old Grandpa Coleby himself, sitting with his back to the library wall—motionless, speechless, but missing nothing. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

“TO THE FAIR CRITIUS”

WHEN John Coleby went into the library he closed the door behind him, and then stood for a moment listening. But he heard nothing. On the other side of the library door was the silence of a tomb, and as he listened he so described it to himself. The silence of a tomb. Whose tomb? His cynical smile remained on his face, but a momentary weariness which would have surprised his guests flickered incongruously across his features, as though he had been under a great strain. Was John Coleby as sure of himself as he appeared? At this instant, screened from his audience, it seemed that he was not.

But the instant quickly passed. Pulling himself together, he looked towards one of the many bookcases with which the room was lined—the wall he looked at, indeed, was almost completely obliterated by books—and exclaimed, loudly:

“Now, then! Where's that book? Theramanes. Would it be—Brewer's? No, Chambers, I think—Chambers.”

They heard him in the other room, as he meant them to. Although he had left them, he intended to remain every moment in their thoughts. Snagg twisted his head, as though the sound of Coleby's voice had released a spring in his neck, and stared at the door through which his employer had passed. Marion half-rose from her chair, caught Jenny's eye, and then sat down again.

“Yes, I think—Chambers.”

“What the devil does it matter what the blighter said?” rasped Rutter.

“Which blighter?” inquired Peter, facetiously. “Mr. Coleby or Theropanes?”

“Theramanes,” corrected Leonard.

“Oh! Was that it?” said Peter. “Well, if hemlock popped him off, whoever wants to pop my uncle off had better hurry,

because there won't be another opportunity to come out with that poison."

It was a silly, fatuous remark, and the levity, well-meant though it was, brought a warning glance from his wife, and a reproof from MacPherson.

"It's observations of that kind," said the Scotsman, severely, "that make Englishmen think we have no sense of humour!"

"*Vol. X—Swas-Zyri*," came Coleby's voice from the library.

Snagg leapt from his chair.

"I've had enough of this!" he yelled.

And the next moment he was out of the room.

"Hey—stop that fellow!" shouted Rutter. "Don't let him go—bring him back!"

It had happened so suddenly that no one had moved, not even Rutter as he shouted, but now Leonard jumped up, shoved his chair back, and set chase. He nearly tripped over the fugitive's chair, which had gone over on its back, and this caused a momentary delay, but he had no difficulty in catching Snagg, for the panting fellow stopped when he heard his pursuer in the hall, and stood still as though petrified.

"What's the matter? Lost your nerve?" inquired Leonard, speaking quietly.

"My God! Haven't *you*?" gulped the terrified little man.

"Of course not! No need to take all this seriously—I reckon Mr. Coleby's just amusing himself."

"Oh! Is he? Well, see, *you* don't know him!" But all at once a new light came into Snagg's dilating eyes. "Or—*do you*?"

"Come along, let's be getting back," said the Australian. "We don't want the whole crowd after us."

Submissively, Snagg allowed himself to be led back, his chalky cheeks tingled now with unhealthy patches of pink. Leonard lifted and replaced the overturned chair, and as the miserable man resumed his seat with a muttered apology, he turned to close the door to find that Jenny had slipped from her own seat and was already doing it.

"You haven't lost your nerve, Miss MacPherson," he remarked.

"And I'm not intending to," she answered, "though I'll be as glad as anybody when this night's over!"

The Reverend Eldred Dixon cast his weak blue eyes towards the ceiling.

"Have faith in the beneficence of the Lord, who watches over all," he murmured fatuously.

It was a ridiculous attempt to introduce the consolation of religion, and his tremulous voice reflected none of the faith he urged; nor did the expression on his face when Coleby's voice came again from the library:

"Theosophy—Theraputae. H'm. No mention of Theramanes. Damn! Then where the devil——? Ah, of course! Brewer's!"

A minute went by in silence. Neither humour nor religion had proved a panacea, and no one seemed capable of making any further effort. Instead of talking they began to watch each other covertly, with the uncomfortable knowledge that the process was going on. Movements became furtive. Finding that she was looking at Coleby's wine-glass, and that Phyllis was looking at her, Mrs. Dixon shifted her eyes, and became conscious of the eyes of old Adam Coleby beyond the white lilies. Rutter watched Snagg across the table. Snagg was sitting stiffly with his mouth half open, as though he were waiting to have a tooth out. Peter began absently to raise a piece of bread to his mouth, then paused and put the bread down again. Forsyth's tongue came out and moistened his dry lips. He looked green. Marion's ear-rings were motionless. Leonard found a strange fascination in watching them. They were as still as though they had been suspended from the ears of a dead woman. He had a sudden intense longing for them to move . . .

Exasperation came from the library.

"Where is Brewer's? Why can't people leave books where I put them? Ah!"

Rutter observed, *sotto voce*, "Oh, he's still there—he's not run away!"

"He couldn't run away," Peter pointed out unnecessarily. "There's no other door."

"Here we are! Dying Sayings. Theramenes, the Athenian, condemned by Critias to drink hemlock, said as he drank the poison——"

Something snapped in the actor's brain, and he began to laugh. It was unnatural, theatrical laughter, and it filled the room horribly, drowning more than one little shriek. "Is he going mad?" thought Leonard. On the heels of that thought swiftly came another. "Has he been mad all along?" He laid a hand on Forsyth's arm. "Say, steady," he said. "Keep steady."

Rutter's voice shouted through the din, "What the hell? How much longer are you going to stay in there? Do you think we care about your damned quotation——!"

"Be calm, I do implore you all!" almost sobbed the clergyman. "Be calm, I beg!"

And then the clock in the hall gave its familiar preliminary wheeze and began striking the hour. Forsyth stopped laughing. Rutter stopped protesting. No sound came from the library. The breath of more than one person was held, for to jangled nerves the chimes had an ominous clang that was even worse than the actor's laughter. . . . Five—six—seven—eight—
nine—

On the stroke of nine, the room was thrown into darkness.

The thing was too inexplicably neat, too appropriately macabre, to be believed. There was an uncanny sense of construction suggesting that Fate, as a rule so prodigally careless of minor details, had turned dramatist. The long-drawn-out tuning of stretched strings in the neurotic orchestra—the prelude of maniac laughter—the slow striking of the clock like a theatrical cue—and now, lights out! It wasn't credible. And yet hardly one of the twelve people round the oval table, waiting for the thirteenth to rejoin them, experienced any sensation of surprise. There had been no general expectation that the lights would go out, but there was an expectation that something would happen, something they were all powerless to prevent. It was merely the form that waited to be revealed.

The final chime in the hall died away. For a few moments, complete silence reigned. The company was suffering from shock; rendered temporarily speechless. Then John Coleby's voice shouted from the library, shouted loudly and furiously:

"Who's put out the lights? What's happening? Who's put out the lights?"

The angry voice in the next room suddenly focussed them on their own plight. Cries and exclamations rose in a delayed chorus of sound. No word was coherent. It was just a jumble of vocal confusion, temporarily drowning the expressions of rage in the library. But all at once Coleby's voice was again heard ferocious with indignation.

"Damnation! This door's locked! Who's locked it! Unlock it this moment! Do you hear what I say? Unlock it, unlock it, unlock it!"

There were movements round the table. Movements on both sides, which were only sorted out afterwards. Someone pushed a chair back. There was the splutter of a match. The black room glowed feebly into flickering light.

Again the soft, spasmodic, eerie, discordant music of Ravel's *La Valse* came to Leonard, with its vague half-developed themes. The match had been struck by Peter, and in its wavering glow, a glow disturbed by darting shadows, the little pictures it revealed were only half-developed. Rodney

Forsyth, sitting stiffly a little way back from the table with folded arms. . . . Something unnatural about that position. . . . Marion Lacey, out of her chair, and half-way to the library door, but with her frightened face turned back towards the table she had left. What was she staring at? Her focus had lengthened to another half-developed picture at the other end of the table—a picture of Phyllis Coleby's hand reaching forward out of dimness towards John Coleby's wine-glass. . . . James Rutter's left cheek and eye; he was also looking at that hand. Peter himself, blinking above the little flame, his smooth hair slightly ruffled. Mrs. Dixon next to him, chalky white, and swaying. . . . She swayed against the holder of the match, coming against him heavily, and the match went out. In the renewed darkness, the clergyman gave a sudden yelp.

"Damn! I've dropped it!" muttered Peter, desperately.

"Strike another," came MacPherson's voice.

"I haven't got another," said Peter. "That was my last."

Invisibility again. The faint swish somewhere of a moving skirt. Somewhere else, a little rustle. From the library, a stifled oath. Then Jenny MacPherson's quick voice, sharp and arresting.

"Someone's left the table!"

"Yes—Miss Lacey," Leonard told her, while Marion's voice whispered from the library door, "There's no key."

"I don't mean her—someone behind here!" exclaimed Jenny.

Leonard shoved his chair back, for now he too heard a movement, and jumped to his feet. He jumped into somebody, and made a grab. Two arms came round him, holding him in a momentary octopus grip, but he wrenched himself free, swung aside, and grabbed again. He missed the first time, but was successful the second, and found himself swaying heavily with a strong opponent. From somewhere across the table came another movement, followed by a trip and a fall. And then came the crowning madness—a shot.

Leonard let his opponent go as a sharp pain tore across his wrist. His opponent did not continue the struggle, and remained beside him, breathing hard. A girl screamed, but not until three or four seconds after the shot had been fired. The shot itself brought no exclamation. Reactions had been numbed. Then the library door opened, and John Coleby stood in the doorway, holding a lighted candle in a tall brass candlestick.

He stood for a moment and regarded the faces that were turned to him. He appeared to have got over his anger, and was the same composed, cynical individual who had left them

six minutes previously. He might have been an acid school-master returning to a classroom which had become a bedlam during his absence.

"Who locked me in?" he demanded, coolly.

No one replied.

"And who unlocked the door?" he went on. "Assumedly the person who did the one also did the other."

"I didn't," said Marion, breaking another silence.

"It appears that nobody did," answered Coleby dryly, and suddenly stooped to the floor, groping on the carpet with his free hand. A moment later he held up the key, replacing it in the lock. "Did I hear a shot? Or is that yet another question too embarrassing to answer? Perhaps my father will answer it?"

He moved to the invalid chair, and for the first time many of those present realised that its occupant was capable of some form of communication. They watched him slowly wink his right eye.

"Ah—I did!" said Coleby. "And who fired it? You?"

It was a cruel suggestion, and somehow Leonard received an impression that the cruelty was intended. Slowly and solemnly, the paralysed old man winked his left eye.

"No, of course not—I was not in the room," went on Coleby. "Well? You have the eyes of a cat. Can you name any one?"

The old man closed and opened both his eyes. Coleby smiled, and began walking back to his chair. Half-way he paused. His nephew was standing behind Phyllis's chair, his hands on her shoulders.

"Get back to your place, my boy. . . . Where's Snagg?"

Snagg's chair, too, was empty. To one side sat Forsyth with his arms folded, a few inches back from the table, as he had been revealed by the momentary match-light. On the other side, Jenny MacPherson suddenly grew rigid.

"If you are under the table, Snagg, which would be an appropriate spot for you at a time of danger, the danger appears to be past, so let us both emulate my nephew and resume our places."

The guess proved right. As Coleby walked back to the head of the table, the pressure against Jenny's leg that had so startled her melted away, and Snagg's form reappeared like that of a mesmerized rabbit. He mumbled something inaudible, which was cut short by Coleby, now standing again in front of his chair.

"Do not waste any more of our time, Mr. Snagg—nothing you could say could help you."

He removed his eyes from the wretched man to his wine-glass, and missed the instantaneous expression that for a split second transformed Snagg's face. It was as though a shutter had opened behind his ferret eyes, revealing the welter of hate that lay behind. The shutter closed. The misery of an exposed coward reclaimed the features.

When all were seated again excepting himself, Coleby regarded his glass thoughtfully, and put the brass candlestick by its side. The flame flickered perilously as he did so, casting deep little shadows across his face. "There is a draught," he said. "Is the door closed?" Jenny left her chair and confirmed that it was. Coleby smiled at her as she resumed her seat. "As composed as ever, Miss MacPherson. It is the quality I always admired you for. I wonder whether in my—perilous position, you would retain that composure? One is almost tempted to envy you."

Jenny did not reply. Her lips were rigidly set. Was she as composed as her host implied? Suddenly, with all eyes fixed on him, John Coleby extended his hand and raised his glass.

"But we were talking of the Athenian Theramanes," he said, "who over two thousand years ago was condemned by Critias to drink hemlock. His dying remark as he drank the poison was, I now find, a little disappointing: 'This to the fair Critias.' Less interesting than the dying remark of the next man on Brewer's list, Thistlewood, who was shot for high treason in 1820 and who said just before the bullet reached him, 'I shall soon know the grand secret.' Yes, that was decidedly good. I should be proud of such a swan-song myself. Yet 'This to the fair Critias' was appropriate to our present toast to death, for he was saluting the individual who was causing his death—as, ladies and gentlemen, let us now raise our glasses to salute the undiscovered individual—now among us?—who would like to cause my own. So—'To the fair Critias!'"

His eyes, which had never looked more satanic, made a swift sweep round the long oval table, and then he put his glass to his lips. Some of his guests began hypnotically to follow suit, some wavered, some remained motionless. John Coleby smiled. . . .

And then a look of sheer consternation transformed his features. His eyes dilated, and he stared ahead of him, over the white lilies, over his invalid father's head. The glass slipped from his fingers back on to the table. He collapsed into his chair.

John Coleby had joined history with Theramanes.

CHAPTER SIX

EX POST FACTO

THE STARK CLIMAX had been reached. John Coleby lay dead. But the atmosphere of death, symbolised by the thirteen miniature skulls round the table, the coffin-shaped salt-cellars, and the tall white lilies, had pervaded the dining-room for so long that most minds were already stunned by horror, and only one person responded immediately to its actual occurrence. Mrs. Dixon gave a little fluttering sigh, and fainted.

Then Phyllis Coleby, with her terrified eyes on the clergyman's wife, rose as though to go to her, but she sat down again weakly when MacPherson cried :

"Don't move ! Don't move anybody ! Stay where ye are!"

The firmness of his voice had a salutary effect. It is probable that David MacPherson saved a panic. In that moment he had taken control, and he continued as he had begun. Despite his own injunction not to move, he moved himself towards Coleby's motionless body, asking as he did so :

"Is there anybody here with medical knowledge ? "

Apparently there was not, for he received no response. He twisted his head round for a moment, and found Marion Lacey on her feet. He noticed something else, as well. She had a small bottle in her hand.

"What have you got there ? " he demanded sharply.

Plainly resenting his tone, she controlled herself.

"Smelling-salts," she answered. "For Mrs. Dixon."

"Oh ! Smelling salts ? Could I have them here first ? "

As she walked towards him he turned back to the dead man to confirm the obvious. He placed his hand over the silent heart, felt vainly for the beating of the pulse, examined the staring eyes, then took up a steel knife and holding the blade almost against Coleby's lips for a few seconds, removed it and examined that. Finally, with a little shrug, he took the smelling-salts from Marion's outstretched hand and held them under the dead man's nose.

"Nae doot aboot it," he announced, handing the bottle back. "Murder's been done. Who's his doctor ? "

Marion replied, "Dr. Griffiths."

"Is he far ? "

"Ricester."

"Will ye phone him the noo ? "

She nodded, and after handing the smelling salts to Peter she walked back across the room. She paused at the invalid chair. Old Adam Coleby, his lined features inscrutable and his eyes two black pin-points, lowered his left lid.

"What is he saying?" asked MacPherson.

"I thought he might want to go, but he wants to stay," answered Marion, and a moment later was out of the room.

Rutter turned on MacPherson savagely.

"You're a bit high-handed, aren't you?" he exclaimed.

"Who gave you permission to take command?"

"Somebody has got to do it, Mr. Rutter," replied MacPherson, stolidly, "and it's a job that needs more control than you have yourself, I'm thinking. But if the company prefer to take their orders from you, they'll no' find me objecting."

"I should strongly object," said Leonard.

Rutter glared at him.

"I'm not taking my orders from anybody," he spluttered.

"Sure you're not," answered the Australian, "but try to leave this room and see what happens!"

"They're right, Mr. Rutter," agreed Peter, withdrawing the smelling-salts, which were having their effect, from Mrs. Dixon's nostrils. "We've got to keep steady, or we'll be running round and round in circles."

"Of course we've got to keep steady—do you think I'm a baby in arms?" snapped Rutter. "But if—if things are to be done, I should have thought you'd have been the right person for the job—you're head of the house now, aren't you?"

"Am I?" queried Peter. He glanced towards the invalid chair, then looked quickly away again. There was something desperately disturbing in the immobility of the dead man's father at this time. "I don't know about that—and anyhow this isn't the moment to talk about it."

But Rutter obstinately insisted.

"This is just the moment we've got to talk about it!" he declared, and added, with unpleasant significance, "as others may be doing before long!"

Peter flushed. "Meaning?"

"You can put your own interpretation on it! All I'm saying just now——" He glared again across the table at MacPherson. "All I'm saying is that *I'm* not going to be treated by anybody as a suspect!"

MacPherson glowered back at him beneath his heavy eyebrows.

"Suspect! Weell, I'll no' say I'd have introduced that

worrd mesel', but since you've done it, Mr. Rutter, it may be as well to remind ye that we are all suspects, ay, and that what we think of each other during the next few minutes, and how we'll pass on our impressions to others who will be just as curious as oursel's, will depend very much, I'm thinking, on our personal behaviour."

The Reverend Dixon suddenly chirped, like a man coming out of gas, "Our behaviour—ah, yes—precisely," and then relapsed into the stunned silence from which he had so ineffectively emerged.

MacPherson went on :

"There's many a thing people outside this room will want to ken about. When and how was the poison put in Mr. Coleby's glass—which, I'll have ye remember, no one must touch. And who did it? And why? And who put the lights out, if that's not the fault of a fuse or the power station? And why? And how Mr. Boyd comes to be sitting in the place of Mr. Codrington—I see you've tied up your wrist, Mr. Boyd."

"Yes, which brings up another point, Mr. MacPherson," returned Leonard. "Who fired the shot that grazed it—and for whom was the bullet intended?"

MacPherson nodded solemnly. "I'm thinking we'll have to be searched."

"And who's to do the searching? You?" inquired Rutter, sarcastically. "The first thing to search for, if you want my opinion, is more light!"

More light appeared as he spoke. Marion Lacey returned from the hall with a lamp. In the increased illumination Mrs. Dixon opened her eyes, stared wildly, and closed them again.

"I couldn't get Dr. Griffiths," said Marion. She spoke calmly. Only she knew what lay behind her control. "He's out on a maternity case."

"He would be!" growled MacPherson.

"I got this lamp from William—the butler," she went on, like a matter-of-fact housekeeper explaining domestic details. "He was coming up with it from the basement, and I met him in the hall."

"Are the lights out below, too?"

"Everywhere."

"Then he was a long time coming up with the lamp."

"There was some trouble or other."

"What?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask. There was enough up here."

"No one will deny that, Miss Lacey. Where is the butler the noo?"

"I sent him down again, and told him that all the servants

were to stay down until they were sent for. No one was to leave the kitchen, where they all are now."

MacPherson nodded approvingly.

"It's a fortunate thing for us, I'm thinking," he said, "that you are handling the situation so sensibly. If we all follow your example we shall do well."

"Thank you."

"Did you tell the butler what had happened?"

"No."

"But he would have heard you telephoning for the doctor?"

"He may have done so. On his way down. Would that matter?"

"I'm no' saying it would," replied MacPherson. "I'm just thinking it is helpful for us all to ken as much aboot the situation as we may. We ken all the servants are in the kitchen, and all of us are here. Clear minds make for clear thinking. Now, Miss Lacey, there are some who say, and mebbe rightly, that I am taking too much upon mesel'—so will you be phoning for the police, or will Mr. Peter Coleby do it?"

"The police?" squeaked Ted Snagg, making his first contribution to the post-mortem.

"I suppose—the police—are necessary?" queried Forsyth, making his.

"Are ye being funny, Mr. Forsyth?" inquired MacPherson, sharply. "I'm thinking this is no time for humour!"

Marion and Peter exchanged glances.

"I think we'd like you to do it, Mr. MacPherson," said Peter.

MacPherson nodded, took up the candle, and rose, catching Rutter's eye and noting its expression as he did so.

"This time, Mr. Rutter, it is by request," he remarked, dryly.

"Yes, you know how to work it!" retorted Rutter, disagreeably. "There'd be a nice fuss, wouldn't there, if any of us tried to leave the room!"

"Dagont, *somebody's* got to leave the room!" MacPherson exclaimed, nearly losing his temper at last.

Rutter reserved his comment till MacPherson had gone. Then, with a glance at the door which the Scotsman had closed behind him, he said:

"You all think I'm a nuisance, don't you? But tell me this! What will be the use of searching Mr. MacPherson when *he* comes back?"

Jenny flushed, but answered quietly, "You'd better ask *him* that—when he comes back."

An odd reflection came into Leonard's mind. Since John

Coleby had collapsed in his chair there had been consternation, agitation, and petty squabbles, but not a single word of sympathy for the dead man or of regret. Nor had there been any sign of personal sorrow. He was convinced that, although the nephew was shocked, he was not grieving. He was less convinced that grief did not lie behind Marion Lacey's control. To the inner feelings of the paralysed father neither Leonard nor any one else in the room had any clue.

Conversation being unprofitable, they waited in silence till MacPherson returned. The period of his absence seemed interminable, though he was only out in the hall for a short while. He closed the door, and resumed his seat thoughtfully. As he did so, the clock chimed the quarter. John Coleby had been dead thirteen minutes.

"Well, did you get rid of it?" inquired Rutter.

"Get rid of what?" asked MacPherson.

"The bottle of poison," answered Rutter.

MacPherson did not trouble to reply. Instead he said:

"I got on to the station at Ricester. The inspector is coming along, and is bringing the police surgeon with him. Nothing is to be moved. Nothing is to be touched. And, of course, naeboddy is to leave the hoose."

"What did you tell them?" asked Peter.

"Just the bare details," said MacPherson.

"The bare details being?" sneered Rutter.

"Dinna ye ken them?" inquired MacPherson.

Forsyth cleared his throat elaborately, as though he were about to deliver a speech.

"I question," he said, "whether the police have any legal right at this stage to insist on our remaining."

"Then ye'd better go," answered MacPherson. "I've nae doot they'll ken where to find ye if they want ye."

Forsyth frowned heavily.

"Have I said I desire to go?" he demanded.

"I see. Ye merely raised the point?"

"Precisely. One is, I presume, permitted to do that."

"Did the police say anything more?" asked Peter.

"Nothing of any consequence," replied MacPherson. "The inspector seemed a sensible mon—he wasna oot for wasting time. His name, he told me, was Hogarth—Detective-Inspector Hogarth—and as soon as he'd got the way of it and kenned I wasna pulling his leg, he cut me short and said he'd be along."

"You were out quite a while for a short conversation," remarked Rutter.

"Between four and five minutes, by the hall clock,"

answered MacPherson, refusing to be baited. "I couldna get on at once."

Leonard asked, "How long do you suppose they'll take to get here?"

"Aboot twenty minutes, the inspector said." MacPherson looked at his watch. "That was—three minutes ago."

"And gives us seventeen still to come."

"Ay. How shall we use them?"

Phyllis gave a little gasp. "Have I—have we—got to stay here—like this—for seventeen more minutes?"

More than one person glanced at her sympathetically. She was the nearest on her side to the body.

"Do you think that's necessary, Mr. MacPherson?" asked Leonard.

Mrs. Dixon, who was nearest on the other side, suddenly shrieked, "Necessary or not, I'm not going to stay here a moment longer!" She had recovered from her initial collapse, and having failed to convert reality into a dream, feared another. "I'm going back to the drawing-room!"

"What? Yes! I—er—a very good idea," stammered her husband.

They both rose unsteadily to their feet, and there was a stampede towards the door. Snagg was the first out, and once the tide had started there was no stopping those who elected to join it. Five remained—MacPherson, Leonard, Forsyth, Jenny, and old Adam Coleby. One hesitated—Marion Lacey. She did not go until she had first assured herself, by their strange method of communication, that the invalid himself wished still to stay.

MacPherson turned to his daughter:

"Better join them, Jenny," he said.

"I think I'd prefer to stay here," replied the girl.

"But ye'll be more use in the drawing-room," answered her father. "We're no thinking you're scared."

"Very well!" She left the table unwillingly. "How is your wrist, Mr. Boyd?"

"Oh, that's nothing to worry about," he assured her.

"You're quite certain? Should I be looking at it?"

"Thank you, but really it's not necessary."

She turned, and her eyes rested on Adam Coleby. Acting on a sudden impulse, she took a step closer and softly patted his sleeve. There seemed to be nothing beyond the sleeve but bone.

"Take the candle, Jenny," said her father. "I dinna ken what they're doing aboot lights. If they've got them, leave the candle in the hall, near the telephone. Ye'll find a chair on its side. Dinna touch that. I hope nobody else has!"

Jenny nodded, took the candle, and left the room, but a few moments later she put her head in again.

"The chair is still on its side," she reported.

MacPherson smiled approvingly as the door closed again.

"A bonny lass, that," he observed.

"I agree," answered Leonard.

"Ay, she'll help to steady them in the drawing-room," said MacPherson.

"Yes. She and Miss. Lacey."

"Miss Lacey?" MacPherson's eyes grew thoughtful.

"Mebbe. Mebbe."

Forsyth, who had never departed from his atmosphere of aloofness, suddenly stirred.

"A chair? A chair on its side?" he asked.

"Ay, in the hall," replied MacPherson. "Near the lavatory."

"You did not mention that."

"Mebbe there's other things I havena mentioned, Mr. Forsyth."

"That remark sounds offensive," said Forsyth, with dignity. "I shall not notice it."

He shifted his chair, as though he were obeying a stage direction, and gave the Scotsman more of his back.

"What's your opinion about the lights?" Leonard asked MacPherson, after a pause. "Do you think anything's gone wrong at the power station?"

"It would be—a coincidence," MacPherson answered cautiously.

"A damned uncanny one!"

"A damned unlikely one!"

"Yes, I'm with you there, and the same applies of course to any local fuse trouble. But—if the thing was deliberate—who the devil——?"

"And how the devil?"

"Wouldn't the normal procedure be to find the fuse-box and have a look at it?" suggested Leonard.

"Ay, that would be the normal procedure if the circumstances were normal," replied MacPherson, "but ye ken they are not!"

"Still, we could do with a little more light."

"In more sense than one, but I'm thinking we'll leave the police to provide it. The difficult thing, Mr. Boyd, before the police arrive, is to determine the line between doing too little and too much."

Leonard nodded rather absently. A sudden sense of in-

credulity had seized him. Five hours ago he had stepped out of a train into an unknown region. Years of familiar life lay behind him, and he had been moving towards a misty, filmy future. Now the future had developed swiftly, starkly, grotesquely, wiping out the old familiar background and substituting new compelling factors. He was in the middle of a nightmare. The concrete evidence of its reality was all around him. Within a few feet of him was a corpse. Oh, yes, you read about corpses, but here the thing *was*. Closer was a scarred actor who, if he were not yet mad, was surely due to be. A long oval table, which had outrageously heralded death, and now gloated over its triumph. The scent of lilies, heavy in the air. Were the noseless skulls imbibing it? Facing the corpse, at the far end of the oval, a living corpse. The one who should have been dead was alive, the one who should have lived was dead. Somewhere, a revolver. In a homicide's pocket? Somewhere, the evidence that would put a rope round a poisoner's neck. Somewhere, a smile. . . . Whose smile? What made him think of that? The smile was not a part of the nightmare, it had slipped in, as incongruous as the rest.

David MacPherson glowered at the lilies. Then he lowered his eyes and glowered at the miniature skull which bore his name. He was bitten with an absurd desire to stare it out. But of course it is useless to attempt that with a skull until you have become a skull yourself, when assumedly the match would be a draw. "And after all," thought MacPherson, seeking relief in absurdity, "I'm no' so sure I'd be pleased to see those damned little eye-sockets turn away!" This period of waiting was very trying. With so much to do, it was difficult to sit still and do nothing. Yes, that line between doing too little and doing too much was a bit of a puzzle. He wondered whether he had solved it? He wondered what sort of a fellow Detective-Inspector Hogarth would turn out to be? And the police surgeon? And how many constables would turn up? MacPherson had suggested bringing more than a couple. He wondered who this Leonard Boyd was, and how he had come to join the party. He wondered what was going on inside the unbalanced mind of Rodney Forsyth, a portion of whose back he could see out of a corner of his eye. He wondered what was going on inside the mind of old Adam Coleby. If anything was. Perhaps those affirmative and negative winks were merely the automatic responses of a vacuum.

But old Adam Coleby's mind was not a vacuum. He, too, was thinking.

All at once Rodney Forsyth, who had begun mumbling to himself, raised his voice and began declaiming :

“ No, not an oath ! If not the face of men,
The sufferance of our souls, the time's abuse—
If these be motives weak, break off betimes,
And every man hence to his idle bed ;
So let high-sighted tyranny range on,
Till each man drop by lottery——”

He leapt from his chair, and his voice grew passionate :

“ But if these,
As I am sure they do, bear fire enough
To kindle cowards, and to steel with valour
The melting spirits of women—then, countrymen,
What need we any spur but our own cause
To——”

He stopped abruptly as he had begun, passed a hand across his brow, and stood for a moment uncertainly. Then he gave a sudden smile, and shrugged his lean shoulders.

“ Exit,” he grinned.

Wheeling round, he left the room

“ Should one of us go with him ? ” queried Leonard.

“ I'm thinking one of us should,” replied MacPherson.

“ And you're thinking I am the one,” said Leonard. “ Well, if that's O.K. by you, it's O.K. by me—I can't say I'll mind a change of scene.”

He followed the actor out.

Alone with Adam Coleby, if one eliminated the corpse as company, MacPherson turned to him.

“ This must be very trying for you, sir,” he said, “ and mebbe you'll allow me to express my sympathy. Would I be arranging the noo to hae ye taken back to your ain room ? ”

Old Adam lowered his left eyelid. MacPherson sighed to himself, and lit a cigar.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"ACT TWO"

IN THAT unhappy exodus from the gloomy dining-room Mr. and Mrs. Dixon had been the first to rise, but Ted Snagg, nearer the exit had been the first to reach the drawing-room, and he stood there for a moment alone and panic-stricken. The hall had been dark, but a slit of firelight had marked the drawing-room door, and his miserable little figure made a black blot against the burning logs. The dining-room fire, being electric, had gone out with the lights, but wood and coal are not at the mercy of electric currents.

The next arrival was James Rutter. He paused in the doorway to regard Snagg's silhouette, then made a quick movement towards him as the little man jumped and turned. The movement was not completed, for hurried footsteps in the hall caused Rutter to change his direction, and he veered round to the right towards the faintly gleaming ornament cabinet. When the next comers entered, Mr. and Mrs. Dixon, he was by the cabinet, separated from Ted Snagg by several yards.

"For heaven's sake, my dear—I do beg——" muttered the clergyman.

"Go on like that, and I'll scream!" rasped his wife.

"Eh? Quite! Ah, a fire! Come, let us get warm!"

As they moved towards the fire Snagg slipped aside quickly, trying to eliminate himself, but the movement attracted the attention he wished to avoid. Snagg provided the clergyman with a strange comfort. Here was someone even more miserable than himself. It helped him to regain a little of his clerical status.

"A terrible business, Mr. Snagg, a terrible business," he said, spreading out his hands before the flames while his wife sank down on to the settee. "But provided the conscience is clear and the spirit humble, we can survive all tragedy, *Deo adjuvante*."

"That's right," mumbled Snagg.

"I understand you—er—worked for poor Mr. Coleby?"

"That's right. And a better employer no one ever had, I'm sure."

Unnoticed, Rutter turned from the cabinet and stared at the speaker, then suddenly smiled with cynical comprehension.

"A happy tribute to the dead," murmured the Reverend

Eldred Dixon, "and, in such circumstances, a very right one. *De mortuis nil nisi bonum.*"

Latin always did him good, especially when other people did not understand it. But Peter, entering at that moment with Phyllis, understood it, and winced a little.

"How are you feeling, Mrs. Dixon?" asked Phyllis, not because she cared, but because it helped one to believe one did.

Mrs. Dixon did not reply. In a corner of the settee she had closed her eyes again, and was struggling to imagine herself at home in bed.

"The shock," explained her husband, unnecessarily. "But we shall all feel better in—er—here. . . . If only we could have a little *light*," he added irritably.

"We shall have, in a moment," came a quiet voice from the doorway, and Marion Lacey half-materialised from the darkness of the hall.

Her calmness should have had a steadying influence on the company, but there was something uncanny and unsettling about it that destroyed its healing quality. They watched her dim form move towards a wall, become lost in a shadow, and reappear. Now she was carrying a five-branched Chinese candlestick, which she placed upon a small octagonal table. Peter advanced with a box of matches from the mantelpiece—his own last match had been used in the dining-room—and in a few moments five little candle-flames joined the firelight's illumination. The candles were tall and thick, and bore devices of winding green dragons.

"Well, that cheers up one half of the room, anyway," said Peter. "Ah, and here comes Miss MacPherson with another candle."

But Jenny vanished as he spoke, to reappear again without the candle. "I left it in the hall," she explained.

"Good idea," answered Peter. "May save us knocking our shins. What about the rest? Aren't they coming?"

"I think they're staying."

"Oh! Well, I expect somebody should." He looked undecided. "Perhaps I should have stayed myself."

"You're not going back there!" exclaimed Phyllis, sharply. "Please!"

"All right, darling. I—I only wondered——"

He glanced at Marion, who still stood by the five-branched candlestick, with little shadows flickering over her face, and it came over him, almost for the first time, how attractive she was. Yes, still was. Glowing behind the green dragons like a dark flame. He glanced at her for some guidance as to his position. He was the dead host's nephew, but he did not live

in the house as Marion Lacey did. Which of the two should now carry on the host's duties? She was doing nothing to try and put all these worried and frightened guests at their ease—just standing there, like an oriental ear-ringed statue. Odd how those gold loops seemed somehow to be an essential part of her. Hell, what did it matter? Yet surely someone should do something. What? Talk about the weather?

The company drifted into little whispering or silent groups. Jenny joined Phyllis, though they did not seem to be finding anything to say to each other. The clergyman, cut off from communion with his wife by her closed eyes, attached himself to Snagg, and attempted to build up his shattered superiority complex by murmuring spiritual platitudes, none of which did either of them any good. Peter moved towards Rutter, now by the window at the far end of the room, and apparently lost in the contemplation of a heavy brass paper weight in the form of a globe that was standing on a little desk.

"This is pretty ghastly," said Peter.

Rutter turned, and regarded him glassily, with the expression that usually accompanies the retort, "Queen Anne's dead." But Peter hated silence, and refused to be discouraged.

"What do you think of it all?" he asked. "Have you any theory?"

"Have you?" countered Rutter.

"Not a ghost," said Peter.

"Then how should I have?" inquired Rutter, irritably. But he added, "Yes—I have one."

"Can I hear it?"

"Certainly! Why not? Whoever poisoned your uncle, I didn't."

"Well, come to that, I don't believe I did, either," replied Peter. "You think he *was* poisoned, then?"

"Of course! What? How do I know?" He looked exasperated. "Why ask *me* all these questions? If you want to ask 'em, MacPherson's the one to go to! He seems to be managing the damned business!"

Peter felt his own anger rising. He retorted, "It will soon be the police's business! No harm, is there, in exchanging some of our own views before they come? Another thing they'll make it their business to find out is who fired that shot!"

Rutter looked at Peter sharply.

"Meaning anything?" he demanded.

"Only that it came from our side of the table."

"Oh! And how do you know that?"

"Don't you agree?"

A sound in the hall diverted their attention, and as Peter turned, Rutter took advantage of the moment to whip out his handkerchief and wipe his brow. A moment later, Rodney Forsyth strode into the room. Strode in, and paused, with a sudden smile of incongruous approval.

"Ha! Act Two!" he exclaimed. "The drawing-room of Moat Hall. Action continuing on. All the guests are discovered in agitated attitudes. Lighting—firelight and candles. The lighting is excellent, excellent. We'll have it just like that. The firelight on Mrs. Dixon, the candlelight on Miss Lacey, the rest—the rest only half illuminated. I think, Mr. Snagg, you should be just a little farther back—in complete shadow. Then, when you step forward, we will give you the limelight. A dramatic moment, eh? Right! Curtain up! Carry on!"

The Reverend Eldred Dixon gulped, and turned indignant eyes on him. "Really!" he spluttered. "Really!"

Forsyth laughed. Mrs. Dixon, her eyes now wide open, remembered the actor's laughter in the dining-room, and shuddered. Forsyth turned to Peter.

"Your cue, I think," he said. "Clergyman: 'Really, really!' Mr. Peter Coleby, indignantly—well?"

Peter was white with anger, and but for a warning glance from Phyllis might have failed to control himself.

"Do you think this is in good taste, Mr. Forsyth?" he demanded.

"Come, sir, come!" replied Forsyth, with a malicious grin. "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances—though one who was lately among us has performed his exit somewhat before his time—ch?"

Then Jenny made an effort.

"Can't you see, Mr. Forsyth, we're not in the mood," she said, quietly. "We're all of us tired—as you must be. Come and sit down."

He turned to her. Something in her very naturalness made him waver, but she had not quite pricked the bubble.

"Invest me in my motley—give me leave," he muttered, "to speak my mind, and I will—h'm! What's next? It's gone! Give me leave to speak my mind—to speak my mind——"

Marion glanced beyond him into the hall.

"Mr. Boyd. Can't *you* stop him?" she begged.

Forsyth swung round, and faced Leonard.

"Do you follow me everywhere?" he exclaimed, his brow dark.

The actor's protective mantle had fallen from him, revealing a fiercely angry man. The transition was unnerving. But Leonard smiled back.

"Sure!" he answered, amiably. "And I'm sorry I'm late for the performance. As you know, I've never seen you act. But—have I followed you before?"

"What?"

"Never mind, it's not important." He walked past Forsyth into the room. "I congratulate you on those candles, Miss Lacey."

"There are some more in the wall-brackets," exclaimed Marion, spurred suddenly to movement. "I'll light them."

Forsyth scowled. He had lost his audience. And an audience to him meant even more than a sermon to Eldred Dixon. His moods changed frighteningly—frightening no one, at times, more than himself.

Leonard found Jenny standing beside him, her eyes gravely inquiring.

"Is my father still—in there?" she asked.

He nodded. "I'd have stayed with him, but he didn't seem to think it necessary."

"You're meaning he thought you'd be more useful here?"

"That's it."

"Well, you've done something useful for us——" She glanced round, and lowered her voice. "You stopped Mr. Forsyth! So now I'm thinking, Mr. Boyd, it's time we did something for you."

"For me?"

"I want to look at your wrist."

"Oh, that! I'm all right," he assured her.

"I ken fine you're all right, but I want to look at it, just the same. Maybe it needs washing—and do you call that a bandage, now?"

She frowned at him and gave her pretty dark-haired head a little jerk towards the hall; then, as though to stop all further argument, left the room. Leonard hesitated. For the moment the situation in the drawing-room seemed a little easier, and some of the guests were assisting Marion Lacey to light more candles. Already a few had been lit, protruding in pairs from wall-brackets, each new light making its tiny contribution towards alleviating the gloom. . . .

"Aren't you coming?"

He followed her out. He wondered whether his wrist were her only reason for this diversion. He followed her down the shadowy hall, illuminated only by the single candle near the telephone, to the cloakroom at the end. She seemed to know

the house. He wondered how often she had been in it, and what had brought her here at all. This was not her environment—this gloomy place, presided over by strange people and static with twisted history. Time seemed somehow to have got caught in Leak Hall; to be in a jam. But Jenny MacPherson belonged to heathery moors, to the tang of invigorating air, to movement.

She had not paused as they had gone by the dining-room door and the overturned chair, and now they passed into the cloakroom. It was an odd though pleasant sanctuary. She unwound the handkerchief and examined the wound.

"No so bad," she pronounced.

He liked her slight Scots accent. He had already discovered that, although it was never as strong as her father's, it became more apparent in her relaxed moments.

"I told you," he said.

"But you'd have told me the same if it had been bad," she retorted, shrewdly, "and I'm no' saying it doesn't need a proper dressing."

There was a basin in a corner. She washed the wound with practised fingers, produced a disinfectant from a little cupboard on the wall—was it knowledge or instinct that took her to it?—made a pad with her handkerchief, despite his protests, and finished off the bandage with his own refolded.

"Thank you—that's fine," he said, as she was finishing. "And what about you?"

"Me?" she queried.

"Yes. All the trouble here isn't physical."

"Oh, I ken your meaning." She shook her head. "Dinna trouble about me, Mr. Boyd. I've never been one to faint."

"Not like Mrs. Dixon. I can believe it." He hesitated, then took a shot. "Aren't you very upset?"

"We're all upset."

"Yes, of course—I apologise for being too curious."

She raised her eyes for a moment from the bandage, then lowered them again.

"And we're all curious," she said, "and there's no need to apologise. Maybe I'm as curious about you, Mr. Boyd, as you are about us. But I'm thinking the inspector will be satisfying a lot of our curiosity before very long, more than we like, so——" She did not finish the sentence. "There! How does that feel?"

"O.K."

"Then we'd better be getting back."

"Afraid so. I mean, yes."

He caught her momentary smile.

They found her father standing outside the dining-room door as they returned through the hall. He eyed the rebound wrist.

"Jenny's a good hospital nurse," he remarked.

"She is," agreed Leonard. "No more news, I suppose?"

MacPherson shook his head. "I've just come out for air," he answered, grimly.

The hall clock struck the half-hour. There was something incongruous in its dependability—it possessed the one voice in the house unaffected by emotional events—but though immune itself it had now a startling quality, dividing discomfort into sections, and indicating the approach of more to come. From the drawing-room, as the chimes died away, rose Rodney Forsyth's voice:

"And so, from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe,
And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot,
And thereby hangs a tale."

"We'd better be getting in," muttered Leonard.

The drawing-room was brighter now. There were five-branched candlesticks at either end, and candles glowing in pairs along the lengths of two walls, bringing out the colours of the women's dresses and the whiteness of the men's shirts. Phyllis in blue, Jenny in green, Mrs. Dixon in less attractive brown—though she, Leonard reflected, would have killed any colour—and Marion Lacey in the sheathing black that suited her hair and skin so well and helped to accentuate her gold ear-rings. "If she were just a touch more daring," thought Leonard, "she would have a red rose in her hair."

But the temporary alleviation brought by the new lights had been short-lived. The little spurt of activity, the little burst of fictitious vim, had faded out as do all things not based on solid foundation, and gradually the atmosphere had deteriorated again. The clock had revived the suppressed actor. He was quoting Shakespeare once more.

And once more he turned, as Leonard entered.

"Don't let me interrupt you," said Leonard, pleasantly.

"Are you being rude?" inquired Forsyth.

"What makes you think so?" asked Leonard. He glanced round the room. "Where's Mr. Snagg?"

"What! Snagg?" exclaimed Rutter, looked startled. "Isn't he here?"

A car drew up outside. A few moments later, the front door bell rang.

CHAPTER EIGHT

FROM THE OFFICIAL ANGLE

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR HOGARTH, whose business it was to solve enigmas, was something of an enigma himself. He had a contempt for ordinary police methods, and he always argued that had he been a criminal he would have had little difficulty in getting away with all his crimes. He had, therefore, a contempt also for the ordinary criminal who allowed himself to be caught. But since, despite all this, he was not invariably successful, he sometimes directed his contumely against himself, and had been known to complain of the leniency shown to him on such occasions by the higher powers above him. This leniency was due to the fact that his successes outweighed his failures, and that for crimes of an original nature his methods were apt to succeed where others failed.

Unconscious that he was about to undergo one of his severest tests, he sat in the charge room of Ricester Police Station and expounded some of his ideas to his stolid sergeant.

"The trouble, very often," he said, "is that we begin by knowing too much. I mean, we let somebody paint the picture for us instead of painting it ourselves. Get what I mean?"

"No," answered Sergeant Brown.

"What don't you get?"

"What you mean."

Hogarth smiled.

"Then I'll give you an illustration. Now, listen. This phone rings. You answer it——"

"No, you do," said the sergeant.

"No, you do," replied Hogarth. "I'm not here. The phone rings, and some excited bloke at the other end yells out that his cook is lying dead on the kitchen floor, a bloody bread-knife is lying next to her, a shriek was heard six minutes ago, and the butler is missing. Well, what do you do?"

"Get the address, and pop along," answered the sergeant.

"Just that?"

"Well, I'd get a few more particulars first——"

"Exactly. You'd get a few more particulars first. And you'd arrive in an unreceptive mood, with your mind made up——made up that the butler had murdered the cook with the bread-knife, and that all you had to do was to find the butler so that he could be nicely hanged."

"He probably would have murdered the cook with the bread-knife," the sergeant pointed out.

"Yes, he probably would," agreed Hogarth, "in which case you may be certain you would find it out. But suppose he hadn't? Suppose the person who telephoned had murdered the butler? Or the cook? Or both? Or suppose it was the butler who had telephoned, and it was somebody else who was missing? Or suppose the bread-knife had never done anything more dramatic than cut bread, and was being used as a blind? And aren't you going to wonder why six minutes elapsed between the scream and the telephone call? Suppose the scream didn't occur at all? Suppose it was a train whistle? Until you have arrived on the spot, and seen the people concerned, and talked to the people concerned——"

"You couldn't talk to the cook," objected the sergeant.

"Don't be frivolous, Brown," remonstrated Hogarth. "The point I am trying to impress upon you is this. That we possess instincts and perceptions and reactions which, coupled with a working knowledge of ourselves and of psychology, form a much truer guide to the truth than ten volumes of predigested facts. Unless we get our details first-hand and receive our impressions first-hand, our instincts and our reactions are numbed, and we lose the most valuable guides we possess. . . . If you are as bored as you look, sergeant, you must be bored."

"No, I wouldn't put it quite like that, sir," said Brown, generously, "but I get along better with words of one syllable. What you seem to want—if I understand you aright—is to be in a house where there's going to be a murder, and to wait for it to happen."

"That is exactly what I want," answered the inspector. "You understand me aright."

The telephone rang. He lifted the receiver. "Ricester Police Station," he said.

Watching him, Sergeant Brown noted the swift change of expression, and inwardly sighed. Something was up, and he liked quiet evenings. "Yes . . . Yes . . . Yes." Something bad. Brown knew that tone. "You're quite sure——? Yes, of course, I'll bring the police surgeon along." Brown rose from his hard chair and fiddled with his notebook. "I've got that. Only essential details, please." Receiving nothing to write down, Brown walked to a second telephone and stood by it. "Anything more, or can the rest wait? . . . We'll be along. See that no one leaves. . . . Quite, but they won't help themselves if they do. And see that nothing is moved or touched. . . . Good! Can you say the time? Four minutes

past ? ” Hogarth glanced at the clock. “ That’s ten minutes ago. . . . I see. . . . No, this is the first ring we’ve had since then. MacPherson, was that the name ? . . . Right. . . . Couldn’t have done better, sir. . . . About twenty minutes. Make it less if I can.”

He snapped back the receiver. Brown lifted his heavy eyebrows inquiringly.

“ Leak Hall,” said Hogarth, crisply. “ John Coleby’s dead.” Brown whistled. “ Get on to Smith, and tell him he’ll be wanted, and to report to me at the Hall as quick as he can. We’ll take three constables—Ash, Evans, and Roper. And Sellars can take over here.”

“ Right, sir,” answered Brown, and got busy.

Hogarth lifted the receiver again. In a few moments he was talking to the police surgeon.

“ Dawson ? Good man ! We’ve a job at Leak Hall, we’ll pick you up on the way. . . . Sorry, can’t help that, they’ll have to play three-handed. . . . Yes, John Coleby, only apparently you won’t be able to help him. . . . Stone dead, I’m told, drinking a health. . . . Well, Dawson, that’ll be up to you to say, won’t it ? Be ready for us in two minutes, but don’t curse if you have to wait.”

He rang off, paused two or three seconds, and then got on to the local power station.

“ Ricester Police. Inspector Hogarth speaking. Have you had any trouble to-night ? . . . None at all ? . . . No inquiries, no complaints ? . . . Much obliged, that’s all. . . . Yes, thanks—just wanted to know.”

As he replaced the receiver thoughtfully, Brown was replacing his.

“ Smith is out,” reported the sergeant, “ but his old woman knows where he is and is fetching him.”

“ Right. Get the car and the constables. I’ll see Sellars.”

Things moved. By eighteen minutes past nine the party of five were gliding away from the station in the police car, Sergeant Brown at the wheel, and by twenty minutes past the surgeon was trotting down his front door steps, with his little black bag, and joining them. Dr. Dawson was a big rather horsey-looking man, without the vestige of a bedside manner. His habitual attitude implied that he was heroically controlling a very bad temper, which often was the case. But he knew his job, so his patients and the police bore with him.

“ You’ve been four minutes—that’s twice two,” he grunted as he took his seat beside the inspector.

“ Be grateful it wasn’t eight,” answered Hogarth. “ Got all you need ? ”

"I shan't know till I miss it. Well, give me the low-down. Poison, eh?"

"That's the unofficial theory. You weren't Coleby's doctor, were you?"

"How do you know that?"

"They tried to get on to his doctor but he was out."

"That'd be Griffiths—lucky devil!"

"Why?"

"To be out!"

"Ever attend Coleby?"

"Once."

"You sound as if once was enough."

"It was. Five years ago he sent for me to overhaul him, and when I told him there was nothing the matter with him he told *me* that he knew it. 'Then what have you wasted my time for?' I said. 'I haven't wasted your time,' he answered, 'you'll be paid. But my old doctor has just died, and the time to have a look at a new one is when you're well and he can't do you any damage!' What do you think of that?"

"I see," smiled Hogarth. "While you were examining him, he was examining you! And what was *his* verdict?"

"I won't repeat it," growled Dawson. "I told him to go to hell, and that I'd meet him at his funeral."

Three constables grinned, and a sergeant chuckled.

"Eyes front, please, sergeant," said Hogarth. "Your pace is too good for mirth. We want to get there."

"Yes, and I want to know a bit more before I get there," Dawson reminded him. "I'm still waiting."

"Briefly, it's this," replied Hogarth. "Dinner party at Leak Hall. Round about a dozen guests. At the end of the meal Coleby proposes a toast, and dies promptly after drinking it——"

"Do they know he's dead?" interrupted Dawson. "Anybody there with medical knowledge?"

"The guests who telephoned—name MacPherson—said he'd made several tests, and was convinced of it."

"How long was he speaking after Coleby's collapse?"

"Roughly, ten minutes."

"Bunkum! A person without medical knowledge can't be convinced! Did you suggest emetics—salt, mustard—or artificial respiration?"

"If Coleby's dead they won't help, and if he isn't, a person without medical knowledge may do more harm than good. I got on to you, and we're on our way there now, but personally I'll back my future that Coleby's finished with this world."

MacPherson sounded solid—he tested breath, heart, and pulse.”

“All right. Anything more?”

“Not that concerns you, I think.”

The doctor grunted.

“I should have thought you were the last sort of person, Hogarth,” he remarked dryly, “to put us all in watertight compartments!”

“Sorry—though sometimes it isn’t a bad idea,” the inspector responded. “But actually I know little more myself so far. I gather there’s plenty more to know, but I asked MacPherson to confine himself to essential details and save time.”

“The essential details being?”

“These—as given by MacPherson. That somebody had sent Coleby a threatening letter. That few of the guests had cause to love him. That he was in a cynical, taunting mood—apparently he meant to use the occasion to discover the writer of the letter—and that the toast he had proposed was actually to this unknown individual. Add the facts that the electric lights went out all over the house when Coleby was in the library looking up a quotation a few minutes before he returned to his death, that a shot was fired in the darkness, grazing one of the guests, that a chair was found overturned in the hall, and that Coleby’s final emotion, as reflected by his expression just before his collapse, was the most utter and terrified stupefaction—and you will know about as much as do myself. Oh, one thing more. For a short period—coinciding, I think, with the darkness, though I’m not quite sure about that—Coleby was locked in the library and was shouting to be let out. Not a bad collection of preliminary facts, eh?”

The doctor nodded, and for several minutes nobody spoke as the facts revolved round and round their minds, and the brilliant headlights of the police car licked up the blackness. Overhead stars glimmered through gaps in the clouds, and a faint new radiance began to appear in the east.

“Got any theory?” asked the doctor suddenly.

“No, and I’d send it packing if I had,” answered Hogarth.

“There’s a right time for everything.”

The moon was just gliding above the horizon as the car drew up outside Leak Hall.

CHAPTER NINE

FIRST DISCOVERIES

SIX MEN got out of the car, but only four crossed the little brick bridge over the moat to the front door. One constable remained by the car, while another made his way round to the grounds at the back. Hogarth rang the bell, and almost immediately the door was opened by an attractive woman in a black evening gown. Behind her stood an elderly sandy-haired Scotsman.

"Detective-Inspector Hogarth," the inspector introduced himself, "and this is Dr. Dawson. He'd like to get to work at once."

"I'm MacPherson, who phoned ye," answered the Scotsman. "Come along, doctor, I'll take you in."

"May I know who you are?" asked Hogarth, turning to the woman, while Dawson followed MacPherson to the dining-room.

"I am Miss Lacey, Mr. Coleby's housekeeper," she replied, composedly. But Hogarth decided she was not as composed as she sounded. Well—how could she be?

"And the guests—in there?"

He glanced towards the drawing-room, in the doorway of which stood a tall bronzed man. Marion nodded.

"All of them?"

"Yes, apart from Mr. MacPherson, whom you've just seen. They came in from the dining-room after you were phoned to. Everybody's there but Mr. Coleby's father—he's an invalid—paralysed—and the servants. The servants are down in the kitchen."

"Thank you. Very helpful," answered Hogarth. He was studying her quietly all the time, forming impressions—"Yes, and she knows it," he thought. "*She's* got a secret tucked away, I'll wager!" He went on, "I wonder if you'd help me some more, Miss Lacey, by making me out a list of all the guests, inmates, and servants, with their names and—in the case of the staff—positions?"

"I'll do it at once," she said, and passed back into the drawing-room.

Hogarth watched her go, and was about to turn to the sergeant, who was standing by with a constable, when he caught the eye of the tall bronzed man.

"Yes?" he queried.

"My name's Boyd," said the bronzed man. "Leonard Boyd. I think Miss Lacey made a slight mistake just now—unconsciously, of course."

"What was it?"

"She thought we were all in here, and we were, but now one seems to be missing."

"Who?"

"His name's Snagg." Behind the inspector, the sergeant's eyebrows shot up, but Hogarth gave no sign. "I know he was in here round about ten minutes ago, but I don't see him now."

"Did you see him go out?"

"No. I was out myself."

"Where?"

"In the cloakroom up the end of the passage. Another of the guests—Miss MacPherson—was bandaging my wrist. I expect you were told about that shot?"

Hogarth darted a quick glance beyond Leonard into the room, and his eyes rested for an instant on the wearer of a green frock. Scottish. You could always pick them out. That would be Miss MacPherson.

"Yes. You got winged?"

"I wouldn't put it like that. A graze, that's all."

"Any damage to anybody else?"

"No."

"That's good. Well, we'll find Mr. Snagg—I don't expect he's gone far. Sergeant, take over in the drawing-room, will you? No one to leave—oh, except Miss Lacey, when she's done that list. Ask her to bring it to me in the dining-room."

"And the rest to stand by till you're ready for them, sir?" said Brown.

"That's the idea. Find out anything you can about Snagg—someone may know where he is. Roper!" The constable stiffened to attention. "I want you down in the kitchen. Take over there as the sergeant is doing up here. No one to leave. Keep your eyes open, and your ears open, but your mouth shut."

"Very good, sir," replied Constable Roper. "You don't want me to wait for the lady's list, so's I can check up on the staff?"

"Eight marks out of ten for that, Roper," smiled Hogarth. "It won't be necessary. You can check up from the cook or the butler—you may open your mouth to find out from them if anybody's missing. If anybody is missing, and you can't find 'em at once, report to Evans—he's out somewhere at the back—and also to me."

"Very good, sir."

The constable went along the hall ahead of the inspector at a brisk pace, and reached the head of the basement stairs as Hogarth reached the dining-room door. A sharp exclamation from Roper caused Hogarth to pause.

"Hallo! What's this?"

Hogarth turned away from the dining-room and joined the constable. Together they stared at a small red-haired man half-sitting, half-lying on the staircase five or six steps down, illuminated by the constable's torch.

"Lummy—another corpse?" muttered Roper.

But the man moved as Hogarth descended, and emitted a faint moan. Hogarth touched him on the shoulder.

"Had an accident, Snagg?" he said.

The man became motionless again, but this time his immobility had a different quality. Before it had been limp; now it bore a certain rigidity.

"What's the trouble?" Hogarth asked again. "Did you trip, Snagg, going down these stairs too fast?"

Snagg turned his head round slowly, and blinked dizzily at Hogarth. His face looked yellow, and his forehead was damp. The constable's torch revealed his condition ruthlessly.

"I—I came over dizzy," he mumbled.

"I see. Just that?"

"What? I feel faint. That's why I left the drawing-room. I—I thought I was going to be sick."

Hogarth looked at him hard. There was more than sickness in the man's terrified eyes.

"What upset you?"

"Well—wouldn't to-night upset anybody? All we've been through?"

"I thought it might have been something you'd eaten—or drunk?" suggested Hogarth.

"No!" gulped Snagg. "I mean—no!" He became weakly aggressive. "What are you looking at me like that for? I left the drawing-room, as I said, and—and turned down here because I heard somebody in the lavatory, and then I must have passed out! Do you think I was running away? What should I run away for? All this is nothing to do with me. And, look here, how do you know my name?"

"I happen to be a police inspector," replied Hogarth dryly. Something caught his eye on the stair above Snagg. "Have you been smoking?"

"No!"

"Quite sure?"

"Of course! I ought to know!"

T.O.T.

"Then your story is that you came over dizzy in the drawing-room, left it to be sick elsewhere, heard someone in the lavatory by which you mean that room at the top of these stairs?—alternatively called a cloakroom?" Snagg nodded.

"And then toppled down here and passed out?"

"Well, what's wrong with it?" demanded Snagg.

His colour had returned, and he had two bright pink spots on his cheeks.

"Nothing, I hope," answered Hogarth. "Do you feel well enough now to get back to the drawing-room?"

"What? Yes," muttered Snagg.

"Good! See him back there, Roper, report to the sergeant, and then carry on."

Snagg scrambled unsteadily to his feet, as though anxious to change his company as soon as he could. When he and the constable had gone Hogarth switched on his own torch—there was no other light on the stairs—and picked up the small object that had attracted his attention. It was an almost complete cigarette. Only a small fraction had been smoked, and the charred end was still faintly warm. He raised it to his nose, sniffed, then touched his lips with it. "Why didn't Snagg tell me," he thought, "that somebody had tried to drug him?"

He slipped the cigarette into his pocket.

There was one more short delay before he joined the police surgeon and MacPherson in the dining-room. He peeped into the cloakroom for which Snagg said he had been making when he was diverted by its being already occupied to the staircase.

"Occupied assumedly," reflected Hogarth, "by Boyd and Miss MacPherson, when she was attending to his wound. Well, that would fit." He glanced at the overcoats hanging in a row. The coats were at the end nearest the door, the basin and the lavatory at the far end. He controlled, temporarily, his curiosity regarding the pockets of the coats and walked to the basin. The plug was out and the sides were slightly damp. Neither tap was dripping. Satisfied, he turned, cast another longing glance on the coats, and then left the cloakroom for the dining-room. He noted *en route* the overturned chair.

He went into the dining-room quietly, unnoticed for two or three seconds by both Dawson and MacPherson. This suited him, and explained why he had entered so quietly. You can observe better when you are not under observation yourself, and when there are no mental cross-currents to disturb your independent reactions or hurry your judgments. But although neither the doctor nor the Scotsman noticed Hogarth, he was less sure about the motionless old fellow in the invalid chair,

who was the first surprise Hogarth received on entering that death chamber.

From the invalid chair his eyes wandered to the long oval table with its grim decorating scheme. The deliberate gruesomeness, the frank, unashamed attempt to frighten, modified any sympathy the inspector may have felt for the victim at the other end. "If this man was hated, he also knew how to hate," he reflected. Above the table hung the electric chandelier for which a single lamp now did duty—the lamp was at the far end, illuminating the dead man with the doctor bending over him and the Scotsman standing by—and Hogarth tried to visualise the table as it had looked at the commencement of the meal when the guests had first sat down to it. Many hearts must have beaten fast! Whose heart, he wondered, had beat the fastest when its owner had inhaled the sickly smell of the white lilies and had sat down to face an abominable little skull? His interest quickened. This oval table was a challenge!

"Well?" he asked.

"I wish you'd sound your hooter when you come into a room," complained Dawson, looking up.

"Have you formed your opinion yet?" said the inspector.

"It's poison, obviously," answered the doctor, "but I haven't formed any opinion yet as to which one." He noticed the inspector's eyes on Coleby's wine-glass. "It wasn't standing up when I came in, it was on its side, and if you didn't want it touched you should have been here with me."

"I expect you know how to take up a glass that may contain finger-prints as well as I do," said Hogarth.

"I expect I do," the doctor admitted.

"Anybody else touched it—since Coleby?" Hogarth asked MacPherson.

MacPherson shook his head.

"You know that?"

"Weel, I'm no swearing to it."

"There's a little moisture still at the bottom of the glass," the doctor went on. "Most of what didn't go inside him went on to the cloth when he dropped the glass. Still, there's enough to analyse—just. Lucky chance, its not being broken."

"Any smell?"

"None. None at all. I don't think we'll find it's any of the usual narcotic poisons. According to Mr. MacPherson here, he died in a matter of seconds——"

"I hope I'll die as quickly mesel'," corroborated MacPherson.

"—and it's certainly not strychnine—you've only got to look at him—or prussic acid. I'll name it later. Meantime you can accept the fact that poison in some form caused the death."

"And that the poisoner is still here," added Hogarth.

"That's your concern, not mine."

"Exactly, Dawson. You name the poison, and I name the poisoner." He glanced round the table. "Nobody else seems to have drunk anything. I see all the other glasses are full."

"It was no' a popular toast," MacPherson pointed out.

"So I gather, from what you told me."

"Ay, but there's mair to tell than I've told ye, a great deal mair, and when you are ready to hear it, inspector, I'm ready to tell it to you."

"But I'm not quite ready to hear it," answered Hogarth, his gaze still wandering round the table, "and when I am I'm going to hear it in my own way. I expect, Dawson, we'll want to analyse the contents of all these wine-glasses?"

Dr. Dawson looked at Hogarth sharply. The suggestion interested MacPherson, also.

"It—mightn't be a bad idea," said the doctor. "But what's in your mind?"

"No more I imagine than is in yours. Ah, Miss Lacey!"

He turned to the door as Marion Lacey came in with a sheet of paper. She came in slowly, as though she were trying to control her movements as well as her mind.

"Here is the list you asked for," she said.

"Thank you," replied Hogarth. He glanced at the list as he took it. The writing was neat and steady. She had controlled her hand, too. "Very good of you, Miss Lacey. This is exactly what I wanted."

"I'm sorry I made a mistake when I told you we were all in the drawing-room," she went on, speaking rather mechanically. "I thought Mr. Snagg was there. I didn't notice him go."

"Please don't worry about that. He's back now?"

"Yes. One of your men brought him in."

"How is he?"

"How is he?" she repeated.

"He left the room because he felt ill."

"I didn't know. I expect I was busy lighting the candles."

"I see."

"Of course, I knew he felt upset—I mean, like the rest of us——"

Her voice trailed off. He guessed that she meant more than that, but he did not press her.

"When you came in, Miss Lacey, we were talking about all these full wine-glasses."

He paused for a comment.

"I—don't quite follow you," she answered.

"We thought it interesting that Mr. Coleby was the only one who drank."

She gave a little shudder. It was an attractive movement. Although she was past her youth, her body was still lithe.

"It was—*his* toast," she said, shortly. "Not ours."

"That's true," nodded Hogarth. "And—if I understand the toast rightly—one of you would have been drinking to yourself. Yet, surely, he was the one who should have left his glass alone. Or—might I be wrong about that?"

She looked uncomprehending at first, and then startled.

"What—do you mean?" she exclaimed.

"Oh, just a thought." He made a quiet sign to her, and they drew a little farther away from the invalid chair. Lowering his voice, he said, "Tell me about him. Why is he still here?"

"Mr. Coleby's father?" Hogarth nodded. "Do you want him taken away?"

"That wasn't my question."

"No. You must excuse my answers to your questions—I am not used to this. He wanted to stay."

"Oh—you know that?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I asked him."

"I see. You can communicate with him, then?"

"Simple things. He can hear, though he can't talk or move."

"But he can see?"

"Better than I can."

"That's interesting. Thank you. Please find out whether he still wants to remain."

"Suppose he does?" she said.

"O.K. by me," replied Hogarth.

He watched her approach the invalid chair, and then he walked slowly round the room, but she had the sensation that he was seeing her out of the corner of an eye all the while. When he had completed the circuit and stood beside her again, he raised his eyebrows.

"He wants to remain," she told him.

"Tell him he may," he answered.

"It's not necessary. He knows."

Hogarth went to the library door, opened it, looked in, and

closed it. Turning towards the table again, his eyes rested on the floor.

"I haven't examined all the name cards," he said. "Who sat on the chair nearest to where I am standing? On the left of Mr. Coleby Senior?"

"That was my place," replied Marion.

"And after you fired the revolver, you dropped it?"

She stared at him in astonishment. The astonishment was shared by MacPherson. The doctor paid no attention, continuing quietly with his work.

"I didn't fire the revolver!" she exclaimed.

"It's under the table, a little way in from your chair," answered Hogarth. "Just beyond where your feet would be."

Her pale face flushed.

"I don't know anything about it," she said.

"Then you needn't worry," returned Hogarth. "I understand the shot was fired in the dark. Yes, and talking about that, where is the main electric switch?"

Looking a little dazed, she replied, "Under the stairs in the hall. I'll show you."

"One moment. The lights went out—at what time?"

"What time. Let me think——"

MacPherson interposed.

"It was nine o'clock," he informed the inspector. "I mind the hall clock had just finished striking the hour."

"That would be about thirty-five minutes ago." ("Only that?" thought Marion. "It seems thirty-five hours!")

"The lights go out. Thirty-five minutes later, they are still out, and no one has examined the switches or the fuse-boxes. Is that surprising? Or is it?"

"You wouldna be forgetting, now, would ye," said MacPherson, "that a murrder's been committed?"

"And so——?" prompted Hogarth.

"I'm thinkin' there's nae need for me to tell you that! I've nae mair experience of murrders than Miss Lacey, but it occurred to me that after one had been committed, the first thing to do was to get in touch with the police, and then to leave all the rest of the touching to them. So now ye ken why nobody's looked under the stairs."

Hogarth smiled, and offered no comment. He was not in the least abashed. Many of his questions had the double purpose of sounding the speaker as well as eliciting facts. Facts were his final goal, but psychology frequently led to their revelation.

"Are you ready to see it now?" asked Marion.

"Yes," answered Hogarth. "Please stay in here with the doctor, Mr. MacPherson."

As he accompanied Marion Lacey into the flickering hall, he became conscious of her scent. It was good scent. Individual scent. The inspector liked it, while remaining completely immune to its lure. It both intrigued and annoyed him that he could not name it, for he was rather proud of his nose. "I wonder which men, of all those present, know this scent best, or find it most attractive?" he thought. He was conscious, also, of the black dress, simple in its ingenuity, that so subtly revealed the best of its wearer; and of the glint of the gold ear-rings.

"Here," said Marion.

She indicated a small maroon curtain beneath a portion of the staircase, and her hand moved towards it, but paused as the detective's fingers quickly closed on her wrist.

"Let me," he said.

It was quite silent in the hall. He heard her heart thumping as he stooped. Was the fastness of the beating due to the momentary little shock of feeling his fingers on her wrist—or to something deeper?

"Well? Aren't you going to look?" she asked.

Her voice above him temporarily cloaked the beating of her heart. When the heart sounded again, it was steadier. She was watching herself as closely as he was watching her. She knew what he had heard. "This woman has so much control," he thought, "that when she loses it, it must be just terrific!"

"Will you do something for me?" he said.

"I have to, don't I?" she replied.

"Not at all. This is a private residence, and I can't force your obedience at this stage. That's not to say that obedience isn't wise."

"Then I'll obey you."

"I was sure of that. After all, what I want is quite simple. Will you go into the drawing-room, stay there, and send the sergeant to me?"

She smiled faintly. "I hope everything you ask will be as easy as that."

Hogarth watched her as she left him. Her absence lightened the atmosphere. You realise the weight of some personalities only after they have gone. But something remained after she had gone. Her scent. This vaguely surprised him; he had not gathered it was as persistent as all that. Suddenly a new thought dawned. He advanced his nose towards the little maroon curtain till it actually touched the curtain's folds.

He turned his head, and with his eyes on the dining-room door estimated the distance. He would pace it out presently. Meanwhile his guess was between twenty and twenty-five feet.

Then he carefully slid the curtain aside, revealing a small door. The door opened with a simple catch—he opened it even more carefully than he had moved the curtain—and he studied the black metal fuse-boxes and the positions of the white-handled switches. But his first glance told him most of what he then wanted.

He was still gazing at the main points of interest when he heard a step behind him. Without turning, he said :

"Do you see what I see, sergeant?"

Sergeant Brown stooped and peered over the inspector's shoulder. They resembled a couple of large frogs.

"So that's it," murmured the sergeant.

"Yes, so that's it," answered Hogarth. "Almost humiliatingly obvious, isn't it—excepting, of course, that one hadn't eliminated the possibility of the obvious."

"Funny no one found it out before, sir."

"They left that deliberately to us. Or, rather MacPherson did. MacPherson seems rather a sound sort of person—you might make a note of that, Brown. Have you anything to say about any of the others?"

"No, sir."

"No useful scraps of conversation?"

"No, sir. After Roper brought that fellow Snagg back—he's a nice cup o' tea, ain't he?—there was hardly any conversation at all. Just whispers here and there. Most of them just stood around like stuck pigs."

"Did Roper go down below?"

"That's right, sir. And with Ash at the front and Evans at the back, we've got it all covered."

"We'll hope so. Have you noticed Miss Lacey's scent?"

"No, sir. Only the fluffy one's."

"Oh! You've noticed *that*?"

A trifle confused at the admission, Brown murmured, "Well, she happened to be near me, see?"

"The next time Miss Lacey happens to be near you, then, you'll notice *this*." He touched the curtain. "Take a whiff."

Brown did so. He began a low whistle, quickly suppressed. He glanced again at the switches.

"But we won't jump to any conclusions, Brown," went on Hogarth. "After all, Miss Lacey's scent isn't the only thing I've found here. I don't think that's her handkerchief."

He pointed to a crumpled white object on the ground, half-hidden by the maroon curtain. Until he had drawn the curtain aside it had been completely concealed.

"Hallo! Whose is that?" said Brown.

"We'll have a look," answered Hogarth.

He lifted it, and examined the corners. In one was an initial—R. He consulted the list given to him by Marion Lacey. Only one name began with R.

"Rutter," he murmured.

"Oh, it's the red-faced bloke's, is it?" said Brown.

"If the red-faced bloke's name is Rutter," replied Hogarth, "it appears to be."

"Rutter's the name," nodded the sergeant. "I heard somebody call him that. Well, sir—what's next?"

"Next is to have everybody back in the dining-room," answered Hogarth. "Go and tell them I want to see them there at once. Don't mention anything else—just that. And then——"

He gave the sergeant an instruction. The sergeant grinned. It was the sort of instruction he liked. A touch of drama always went to the spot.

CHAPTER TEN

REPEAT PERFORMANCE

SERGEANT BROWN wasted no time. Returning to the drawing-room he announced, "Will you all go back to the dining-room, please?" and although the words formed a question, the tone in which they were uttered, crisply official, turned the question into an order.

One person at least resented the order.

"What—not the lot of us?" demanded Rutter.

"At once," said the sergeant sharply.

The clergyman was standing next to him, the words snapping almost directly into his ear, and he shot out of the room like a chased hen. His wife followed him with a gasp, and the two of them started a miniature stampede in which even Rutter found himself joining. Phyllis Coleby, as she passed the sergeant—it was she whom Brown had described as the fluffy one and whose scent he had referred to—looked as though she had just been summoned from the waiting-room to the dentist's chair. Snagg, moving unsteadily, toppled against Forsyth, presenting the once-tarboots actor with a picture of undignified agitation which preserved him from the outward show of any he himself may have been experiencing. Sweeping the little man aside as he might have swept an intruding super, he strode out of the room to achieve an imposing exit which no one noticed but himself.

MOHAN'S
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BOOK NO.....

Leonard, among the last to leave, found Jenny MacPherson by his side.

"Soon be over," he murmured.

"I'm not fretting," she answered. "That is no more than one should."

He refrained from asking, "How much is that?" as he caught a glint of gold ear-rings near by.

Sergeant Brown brought up the rear of the neurotic procession, separating from it at the dining-room door.

Detective-Inspector Hogarth was waiting for them. He watched them straggle in, and when the party was complete he cleared his throat.

"Some of you," he said, "may be surprised that I haven't yet heard the full story of what has happened here. Mr. MacPherson gave me the bare outline over the phone, and since I arrived I have been making a few preliminary investigations—and discoveries. The reason I have waited to learn the full facts—so far as they are known—is because I don't want to hear them from one person alone. Personal interviews may come later—personal interviews with each one of you—but meanwhile I'd like to hear what happened in this room from you all."

"How are you going to do that?" demanded Rutter, his attitude that of a man bent on making trouble. "Say one-two-three-go, and let us all shout?"

"That will not be my method, sir," answered Hogarth, unruffled.

"Then what's the idea?"

"Kindly take your seats—the seats you occupied at the meal. The idea is that your memories are likely to be more complete and accurate, and can be more easily corrected by others should you go wrong, if we reconstruct what happened from actual positions occupied at the time. Should any of you object to this, you can leave the room and wait for a more private interrogation in the drawing-room." He looked at Rutter squarely. "Unwillingness to remain, of course, would be noted."

"Who's unwilling?" glowered Rutter.

Probably many were, but no one took advantage of the inspector's permission to retire. In a few seconds all the empty chairs were reoccupied, and the room returned to some semblance of its original aspect. But, ghastly as it had been when the guests had first filed in to shudder at its macabre setting, there were changes now that increased the ghastliness. The table bore the disorder of a concluded meal, although eleven glasses of champagne remained undrunk; and two of

the pedestalled skulls were on their side, touching their reflections in the table's polished surface. In place of the electric chandelier, the sole illumination of the room was a lamp. By its inadequate light, some of the guests appeared to have aged, and all, saving one exception, bore traces in one form or another of what they had been through. The single exception was old Adam Coleby, who still sat motionless and expressionless in his invalid chair, his hollow eyes fixed in the direction of the chair at the opposite end of the table where his son lolled limply.

It was the presence of their dead host that weighed most heavily on the reassembled guests and formed the most nerve-racking of the changes. But the only protest was voiced by the police surgeon, and his protest came from his own medical angle.

"What do *I* do?" he grumbled. He felt impatient. "I want to get on with my examination."

What he really wanted was to get home in time for another rubber of bridge.

"I've no objection," said Hogarth.

"No, but I have," retorted Dawson. "Can I have the body removed to another room?"

"I don't want that done till the photographer turns up," replied Hogarth. "I suppose a postponement of about fifteen minutes won't make any serious difference?"

Dr. Dawson shrugged. The only difference it would make would be to deprive him of fifteen minutes of bridge, and he could not press that.

"Very well, very well," he grunted. "Carry on."

Hogarth glanced round the table, his inquiring expression inviting other objections, but none were offered. The clock in the hall struck the three-quarters.

"Just an hour since Mr. Coleby got up to make his speech," murmured MacPherson.

"Oh, a quarter to nine, was it?" queried Hogarth. "Then suppose we imagine the clock has been put back an hour, and begin from this moment?"

As he spoke, a startling thing happened. Startling, at least, to everybody in the room barring the detective himself. The chandelier above the table suddenly ceased to resemble a dim symbol of the past and glowed with illumination, while behind the invalid chair the electric fire revived. Amid the burble of astonishment, Rutter cried:

"How the devil did that happen?"

"Very simply," answered Hogarth. "Somebody in this house—maybe in the room at this moment—turned off the

light and power from the main. My sergeant has just turned them on again."

Sergeant Brown, with an impassively important face and a secret enjoyment of the moment, came into the room as he spoke. He had a pencil and note-book in his hand, and he crossed to a chair against a wall and sat down.

"So now we are all set," went on the detective, "and we can begin our reconstruction. At a quarter to nine, Mr. Coleby rose from his chair and began his speech. Well? What was the speech about?"

No one answered for a moment. Each waited for some other to speak, and so did Sergeant Brown, with his pencil poised over a page. Then Peter Coleby said:

"He was proposing a toast."

"Yes? To whom?"

"Didn't Mr. MacPherson tell you? It—it was to—you see, he had an idea that somebody was threatening his life——"

"Only an idea?"

Peter glanced round the table, as though for help. He looked flustered. "Someone had actually sent him an anonymous letter," he answered unhappily. "He showed it to us. It was passed round the table. We all saw it—didn't we?"

"I should like to see it, too," said Hogarth. "Where is it now?"

"I'm not sure."

"Probably in his pocket," came Phyllis's voice across the table. "I was the last to read it, and I handed it back to him."

The doctor made a movement towards the body, but Hogarth shook his head.

"Presently. Can any one here remember it?"

"I can," replied Forsyth, and all eyes turned to him.

"What did it say?"

"These were the words," answered the actor, with histrionic relish. "'You are a devil, and you are going to die for it. Say your prayers.' And he did die for it, but whether he said his prayers we do not know."

"Thank you," said Hogarth, watching him quietly. "I am not concerned with the prayers—that would be more in Mr. Dixon's province——"

"Eh? Yes, of course! Quite, quite," jerked the clergyman, with depressed eagerness.

"All I am concerned with," continued Hogarth, "are the facts of the death. You have a good memory, Mr. Forsyth."

"That was trivial," responded the actor. "I could repeat, substantially, the whole of Mr. Coleby's speech."

Hogarth made no attempt to conceal his interest in this statement.

"Do you really mean that?" he challenged.

"A good memory is an actor's necessity. As it happens, I always had a remarkably good memory, but I also trained it. In my days we took our profession seriously—we did not fritter our time away at cocktail parties. Thus—if I may be permitted to say so—we produced our big stars. I merely had to read a part to know it. The rest of the time was spent in studying its interpretation." He paused, palpably enjoying the attention he was receiving. "Do you wish to hear the late Mr. Coleby's speech?"

"I should appreciate it immensely, sir."

Forsyth rose, and began a performance that was completely horrible because it was completely good. The actor was not word perfect; there were both errors and gaps; but nothing essential was omitted, and both voice and gestures were grimly and painfully reminiscent of the original who could speak and gesture no more, and whose mortal remains formed an unheeding audience.

"Thirteen at table—white lilies as a centrepiece—death's-heads holding our very names as though inviting Fate to select one—these things do not worry us. . . . After all, my good friends, what is death? Each of us must meet it, that is common knowledge, and all we do not know is the date and the form. Perhaps it is as well. Æschylus would not have been comforted to know in advance that he was to be killed by the fall, from an eagle's claw, of a tortoise on his bald head. . . . Agathocles was killed at the age of ninety-five by a toothpick. . . . Yes? You want to say something, James?"

Forsyth looked at James Rutter, and grinned sardonically. He might indeed have been John Coleby at that moment. "Your cue, Mr. Rutter," he said. "'You want to say something, James?'"

"Here, I'm not in this!" retorted Rutter, glaring.

"Then I must play your part, as well," answered Forsyth. "You reminded Mr. Coleby that he was supposed to be proposing a toast. You seemed upset. And then Mr. MacPherson——"

"Ye've no call to play my part, for I ken well what Mr. MacPherson said," interposed that individual. "He said, 'Do ye ken, now, whether any one has ever died from a superfluity of worrds?'"

Then Rutter, who had declared he was not in it, changed his mind.

"Give the rest of it, give the rest of it!" he exclaimed. "There was more than that! You said you'd be damned glad if Coleby died——"

"That he did not!" cried Jenny, indignantly.

MacPherson turned to the detective.

"Mr. Coleby, as ye may judge, was not in a mood to invite the courtesies. When he taxed me on my affection for him I did not use Mr. Rutter's words, but I implied beyond any doobt that I wouldna weep at his funeral."

"And yet you—and your daughter—accepted this invitation," commented Hogarth.

"That gangs for the lot of us," replied MacPherson, shortly.

The statement produced a brief silence. It was broken by Forsyth.

"Do I continue?" he inquired. "There is more."

"Of the speech, or of the interruptions?" asked Hogarth.

"Both," answered Forsyth. "Continuing, Mr. Coleby informed us that we were about to drink a toast to Death, and he passed round the anonymous communication which I have quoted, and which, inspector," he went on, fixing Hogarth with his glass eye, "first drew your attention to my memory. After that, yes, there were many interruptions from a number of those now present here. I presume you do not require me to act all these—minor parts?"

"I should be glad to hear anything that may be considered as important," replied Hogarth.

"Is Mr. Forsyth to be the judge of that?" interposed Peter, frowning.

"I think you can leave me to assess the importance or unimportance of anything Mr. Forsyth tells me," answered Hogarth, "and there are plenty of others present to supply any omissions."

"Mr. Peter Coleby need not lear my omissions," said Forsyth, with obvious relish. "I shall not omit an allusion to a quarrel of some years' standing between him and his uncle, which by his own confession made him feel homicidal. There was also a reference—to return for a moment to Mr. MacPherson's relationship with the deceased—to this gentleman's threat to put a bullet through Mr. Coleby. There was also——" Now the glass eye was directed to the Reverend Eldred Dixon, who immediately turned pink. "There was also a hint of trouble between Mr. Coleby on the one part, and Mr. and Mrs. Dixon on the other. Whether these matters are of sufficient importance to be further inquired into, the

inspector, as he has implied, will be qualified to judge. A yet further allusion was made to the absence of one invited guest who, for some unknown reason, did not turn up."

"Who was that?" asked Hogarth.

"His name, I understand, is Codrington," replied Forsyth. "In fact, it is upon the name-card to the right of my own. Gerald Codrington. His place was unexpectedly occupied by the—h'm—somewhat mysterious gentleman by my side, Mr. Boyd."

Heads were turned towards Leonard, and ruffled by the sudden limelight which Forsyth had thrust upon him, he exclaimed:

"Should we omit a still further allusion to a lunatic——?"

An angry cry from Forsyth interrupted him.

"Is that meant personally?" he shouted.

"Well, I remember you seemed to think so at the time," answered Forsyth, already regretting his hastiness.

It looked as though a new scene were about to develop, but all at once the actor controlled himself.

"Mr. Boyd remembers correctly," he said, resuming his heavy histrionic pose, "and we are, of course, merely re-enacting the drama. Forgive me if at moments my art makes me too realistic. Yes, inspector, I resented the allusion. And *you* have forgotten your cue, Mr. Snagg. Let us revert to the script. I have it very clearly in my memory. Mr. Snagg: 'Oh, come! Gentlemen!' Just three words, but excellently rendered. Just the right intonation, Mr. Snagg. A trembling murmur. The would-be peacemaker, driven incoherent by his own private fear. And the audience thinks, 'Aha, that fellow knows something—that fellow's hiding something!'—although, mark, nothing yet has occurred. But something!—although, mark, nothing yet has occurred. But now—listen! Mr. Coleby, turning his cold eye upon Mr. Snagg, and addressing him with Satanic satire: 'We all know your pacific nature, Snagg. We know that your whole life has been devoted to brotherhood and love.' Here Snagg looks as though he would like to sink under the table—stage direction this, you understand—as in due course he does. Mr. Coleby, continuing: 'Both Mr. Rutter and I—your former and your present employer, have had ample opportunity to study your—particular qualities, Snagg. But there is no need for you to pour oil on troubled waters here. Nor, surely——'"

At this point the actor suddenly paused and wavered. The inspector wondered whether his memory were failing him at last, but others present whose memories were also good knew that Forsyth had paused through indecision whether or not

to omit the next passage. He did not omit it. It was almost as though the dead man's compelling spirit had entered into him and, insisting on the full performance, were now giving it himself through another's flesh :

“ ‘ Nor—surely—was there any need for Mr. Forsyth to assume that any of us regarded him as a lunatic. He may in the past have acted the rôle of a madman on the stage, but in real life—to quote our friend Snagg—come, gentlemen, come ! ’ ” The speaker grinned at Snagg maliciously. Snagg's brain began to reel. So, after those words, Coleby had grinned at him. Which one was grinning ? Whose voice was talking ? The voice hardened : “ ‘ And now perhaps you will spare me further interruptions. They savour too much of uneasy consciences, and after all we do not want to suspect the wrong man—or woman. Let me finish what I have to say, it will not take long. ’ ” Forsyth's hand moved towards his glass, and paused. “ ‘ The toast we are about to drink is to the at present unknown individual who plans to take my life, and since that individual may be said to personify death, this is a toast to death. When Theramenes was condemned by the Thirty Tyrants to drink hemlock, he said to the man who had condemned him—he said—— ’ ”

Hogarth's eyes were caught by the tremor of Marion's earrings. Although Forsyth held his main attention, he had the eyes of a hare, and he saw that Marion was trying to say something, but the something stuck in her throat.

Forsyth frowned. “ ‘ One moment—the words will come to me. ’ ”

Again Hogarth wondered, “ ‘ Has he lost the thread ? ’ ”

But he had not. In all his career, Forsyth had never given a better performance. His shoulders went up in a little shrug, and he smiled with faint self-annoyance. “ ‘ Excuse me a minute. I think there is a book in the library that will give the quotation. ’ ”

MacPherson struggled with himself, but the tide caught him. Against his will, he heard himself saying :

“ ‘ Are ye no scared to leave the room ? ’ ”

“ ‘ Scared ? Why should I be scared ? ’ ” replied Forsyth.

“ ‘ Weell, mebbe 'tis no' for me to say, ’ ” responded MacPherson mechanically, “ ‘ but if I were in your shoes, I'd tak' my glass with me ! ’ ”

Forsyth laughed. His laughter bore a note of hideous triumph.

“ ‘ Now might I do it pat, eh ? ’ ” he cried. His voice became richly Scottish. “ ‘ I'm no' scared, Mr. MacPherson, for there's safety in numbers, do ye ken, and if any one in

this room tries to tamper with my glass while I am out of it, there will be eleven very eager witnesses to give evidence against the offender. Including my father at the other end—who misses nothing, and would, I am sure, be ready to tip a wink. Still, Mr. MacPherson, I'm obleeged to ye for the warning ! ' ' "

Then, suddenly, Forsyth's hand went to his head, and his eyes became flat. He sat down, and closed them.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

COMPLETING THE DETAILS

HOGARTH regarded Forsyth curiously during the little silence that followed. The uncanny performance over, the performer had slumped into a trancelike stillness, and in his new immobility might have been giving another imitation of the dead man. The doctor did indeed give a quick professional glance in the actor's direction, but was evidently not worried, for he made no other movement.

" Well ? And then ? " asked Hogarth.

He transferred his gaze to the bronzed Australian. This somewhat mysterious guest, substituted at the last moment for another who had not turned up, puzzled him, and he thought it might prove useful to give him a turn. There had been ample opportunities for studying MacPherson, Forsyth and Marion Lacey during their recitations and conversations, while there were others whose characters were patent from their faces—they did not have to open their lips. Leonard Boyd, however, still remained a very dark horse.

Meeting the detective's eyes, Leonard replied :

" After that Mr. Coleby left the table and went into the library."

" Do you remember what time it was when he went into the library ? "

" A few minutes before nine."

" It was four minutes to nine," said Phyllis, unexpectedly.

" How do you know that ? " inquired Hogarth.

" I happened to be looking at Mrs. Dixon, and noticed her wrist-watch." She coloured slightly as she added, " I've very good sight."

" And I suppose her wrist was above the table ? "

" What ? Yes—I suppose it was."

" It must have been, for you to see it." Hogarth turned to

Mrs. Dixon, who looked flustered at this sudden attention. "Does your watch keep good time?"

Her husband answered for her. "Really—I can't see—er—that this is——" he stammered.

"There is probably a good deal that you do not see, sir," Hogarth interrupted, shortly, "but I happen to be trained for my job. What time does your watch make it now, Mrs. Dixon?"

"Four minutes to ten," replied Mrs. Dixon, faintly.

Hogarth glanced at his own watch and remarked, "So does mine, so we may take it yours is right. Rather a coincidence—we are talking of a moment that occurred exactly an hour ago. We are keeping pace with time. Well? Mr. Coleby went into the library. Did anybody else move? Was there any other movement of any sort? If so, I want to hear what it was, however trivial—preferably from the persons themselves, but if not, then from somebody else."

He noticed that Jenny's eyes were upon Marion, but he believed Marion would have spoken without this hint.

"I began to leave my chair," said Marion, "but then sat down again."

"May I know why you did this?"

"I don't think I know myself, excepting that I felt so worried it was difficult to sit still."

"Thank you, Miss Lacey. I understand that." He waited a second or two, then turned back to Leonard. But Leonard's eyes were upon Snagg, who was sitting painfully still. Soon all eyes turned on Snagg. The limelight switched from one to the other with disconcerting rapidity, nearly always finding the illuminated one unprepared. It was a relief when the limelight shifted away again, and one could become once more the watcher instead of the watched. "Can you tell me anything, Mr. Snagg?"

But it was Peter who answered him.

"Before anybody else moved," he said, "I'd better come out with a damn silly remark I made. There'd been one or two other remarks—I don't think anything important—and with Mr. Coleby muttering away in the next room—well, we were none of us at our best. I expect we all felt a bit like Miss Lacey did."

"What was your remark?"

"I said—it sounds awful, but of course I didn't guess then that—well, anyhow, what I said was that whoever wanted to pop my uncle off had better hurry, because there wouldn't be another opportunity to come out with the poison." He looked appalled at himself, and added, as though to quell his own doubts, "Yes, that's what I said."

"While Mr. Coleby was muttering in the library?"

"Eh? Yes. On and off, you know. While he was looking for his encyclopædia. 'Where's that volume?' 'Brewer's? No, Chambers.' 'Vol. X.' That sort of thing."

"And after your own remark, the one you've just told me——"

"I tried to do a bunk!" cried Snagg, desperately. There was no escaping from the incident, or from others to follow. "I'd had enough. I'm not well! I've been overworking! I felt I couldn't stick it! There you are, now I've told you! I got as far as the passage, and Mr. What's-his-name—Boyd—he brought me back."

Leonard nodded. He had an instinctive contempt for Snagg, but at this moment he felt a wave of sympathy. Snagg certainly was not well. He looked the kind of fellow who could easily be slave-driven . . . while waiting for his chance to get his own back? . . .

"That's right, he lost his nerve," Leonard corroborated. "But he didn't make any trouble when I reasoned with him."

"How did you reason with him?" inquired Hogarth, wondering what sort of trouble a small man like Snagg could have made for a big one like Boyd.

"I said something about the whole thing probably being a joke, and it was foolish to take it seriously."

"Did you mean *that* to be taken seriously?"

"What? My remark?"

"Yes."

"Why not? The thing hadn't happened then. It was all too—preposterous!"

"You thought that?"

"Certainly."

"But you'd seen the letter?"

"Like everybody else. It meant nothing to me. If he didn't write it himself——"

"Do you think he wrote it himself?" interposed the inspector sharply.

Leonard considered for a moment, then replied honestly, "No, I don't. There's not been very much time yet for cool thinking—you see, our brains *aren't* trained for this job, inspector—but I don't believe the letter was Mr. Coleby's invention. Just the same, he could have used it as a basis for a very bad joke. I won't say anything farther than that."

"Thank you," responded Hogarth. "What you have said, Mr. Boyd, is very interesting. Do you remember how long you were out of the room?"

"Roughly, about half a minute, I should say."

"And no one else left the room?"

"Not that I know of."

"Will somebody tell me what happened here in the room during that half minute?"

MacPherson answered, after giving others a chance, "We just waited."

"I see. Nothing to report? Nothing whatever?"

MacPherson shook his head. "When Mr. Boyd came back with Mr. Snagg, he picked up the chair which Mr. Snagg had knocked over in his hurry, and my daughter shut the door again, and we were all back in our places."

"And then?"

"Mr. Dixon proposed that we should all have faith in the Lord, which was no' a bad idea, mebbe, since we were all losing faith in each other."

"As bad as that? Before anything had actually happened?" pressed Hogarth. With one eye on the time, he was fanning the flame of conversation to keep it going.

"Weel, we'd got to the stage, ye ken, when we were all watching each other, ay, and felt that we were being watched. As you say, nothing had actually happened, but I'm thinking you'll forgive us for feeling a wee bit uncomfortable."

"It was horrible!" exclaimed Phyllis.

"You've said it," agreed Rutter.

"I—er—did what I could to assuage—" murmured the Reverend Mr. Dixon.

"Yes, and all the while," said Peter, "Mr. Coleby went on talking to himself in the library, trying to find his book. Mr. Rutter said, 'Well, he's not run away,' and I told him he couldn't as there's no other door but the one leading back into here. Oh, and then——"

He stopped short, and glanced towards Rodney Forsyth, whose eyes had remained closed until this moment. Now, abruptly, they opened.

"And then I laughed," he said. "Would you like to hear it?"

"And me shriek?" rasped Mrs. Dixon shrilly.

Then the clock in the hall took charge. It began to strike the hour, and at each chime nerves already overstrained grew tauter. No one spoke; each counted silently. Six—seven—eight—nine . . . Ten.

"Good God!" muttered Rutter, staring at the chandelier.

"Yes, the lights went out last time, didn't they?" said Hogarth. "All over the house. Including, of course, the library."

Forsyth shouted, " ' Who's put out the lights ? What's happening ? Who's put out the lights ? Damnation, this door's locked ! Who locked it ? Unlock it this moment, unlock it, unlock it, unlock it ! ' "

After a pause, Hogarth asked quietly :

" And did any one unlock it ? "

" The key had gone," answered Marion. " I went to the door. The key wasn't there."

" Did you feel your way to the door ? "

" I struck a match," put in Peter, " though she was on her way by then. The match went out when Mrs. Dixon fainted—she fell against me. I remember somebody gave a yelp. That was you, Mr. Dixon, wasn't it ? "

" Eh ? Yes ! The match fell on my hand," replied the clergyman. " I didn't know what—everything was confusion."

" Did you strike another match, Mr. Coleby ? " asked Hogarth.

" I couldn't—it was my last," Peter told him.

" I see. So there was darkness again. And then ? "

" I think I come next," said Leonard. " Miss MacPherson called out that somebody had left the table, so I jumped up and grabbed someone or other behind my chair. He slipped out of my grasp, but I got him the second time. Then the shot was fired, and as it just grazed my wrist I had to let go again."

" Yes, but something else was going on on my side of the table, too," exclaimed Rutter.

" Yes, the shot was fired from your side," remarked Leonard, dryly.

" Oh, was it ! That's got to be proved ! " retorted Rutter. " But I wasn't talking about that ! I heard somebody tumble ! "

" That was me," explained Peter. " I was on my way round the table, and I tripped."

" What were you going round for ? " asked Hogarth.

" My God, what was I going round for ! " cried the young man. " There was a fuss on the other side, and my wife was on the other side ! Wasn't that enough ? "

" Did you trip over your uncle's chair ? " inquired Hogarth, quietly. " I suppose you went round that way ? "

" I don't know what I tripped over," growled Peter. " Over my own feet, most likely."

" And when you got round ? "

His wife answered for him.

" He stopped behind my chair and put his hand on my

shoulder, and I shrieked—not knowing at first who he was. And then—and then the library door opened, and Mr. Coleby came back, with a candle."

"Ah," murmured Hogarth, with a glance towards the library door. "With a candle. And what did the candle show—besides Mr. Coleby?"

"I'll tell ye one thing it showed," said MacPherson. "It showed that Mr. Boyd and meself had been gripping each other without knowing who we were, but I'll say this right noo to save any misapprehension! It wasna I he gripped hold of the firrst time, because he only had me the once, when I was coming to his assistance."

"So you say," remarked Rutter.

"Apart from you two, then, and Mr. Peter Coleby," said Hogarth, "was everybody else seated?"

"Miss Lacey wasna back in her chair yet, and Mr. Snagg was oot of his," replied MacPherson. "He'd come to the conclusion that he was safer under the table."

But nobody laughed.

"And mebbe now I can finish it," went on MacPherson, "because there isn't much more, and there's nae need, I'm thinking, to trouble Mr. Forsyth with any more performances. Mr. Coleby asked who had locked him in, and nobody admitted it—nor, for that matter, did anybody admit having unlocked the door to let him out again. Mr. Coleby found the key on the floor. When every one was seated again, Mr. Coleby finished his speech. You'll no be wanting the words this time, for 'twas just a string of deathbed utterances—other people's, ye ken. He had nae notion he was making his ain! When it came to drinking the toast, he was the only one to do it—and I've never seen, inspector, such a quick and astonishing change of expression as occurred the moment after he'd tossed the stuff doon!"

"What was the expression?"

"It was the expression of a man dumbfounded! He knew he'd been beaten by the one he was intending to catch, and he dropped his glass and collapsed with the surprise still on his face."

A few turned towards Coleby's body, and seemed to see the surprise still there. Others studiously avoided doing so.

"And then we sent for you, inspector," said MacPherson, "and that's the lot."

"The lot?" repeated Hogarth, as his eyes roamed slowly round the table. "Or only the beginning?"

A car drew up outside, and a few moments later there came a sharp knocking at the front door.

CHAPTER TWELVE

POCKETS

THE NEW ARRIVAL was a quiet little man with a camera. His name, as unpretentious as his appearance, was Smith. Hogarth admitted him, and brought him immediately into the dining-room, where he took some gruesome photographs including one of the oval table with all the guests seated at it. The sole redeeming feature of this work, as far as the guests themselves were concerned, was the skilful speed with which it was accomplished. Less appreciated was the watchful eye of the inspector during the operation. "I believe he's spinning all this out," reflected Leonard, "just to give himself as long as he can to study our behaviour." There was more than a grain of truth in the reflection. One of Hogarth's maxims was, "Don't spare anybody during the first hours, and you may save days later on."

When the photographs were taken, Smith slipped out of the room on other business, and Hogarth turned to Dr. Dawson.

"Well, now all that's done," he said, "I won't stand in your way any more."

"Very good of you," replied the doctor, not graciously. He had been fuming with impotent impatience. "Can I get—him—to a bedroom?" He added, as he jerked his head towards the body, "You see, I've *not* done!"

Hogarth glanced inquiringly at Marion.

"His bedroom is on the first floor," she said.

"Thank you. Sergeant, help the doctor, will you?"

"Yes, and *you're* going to *your* bedroom, too!" exclaimed Marion, turning to the invalid chair with sudden determination. "I won't have you remaining here any longer!"

Leonard thought, "She's fighting two wills—the old man's and the inspector's. My bet is that this time she wins."

The bet was right. Hogarth nodded, though he made the provision that she should wait till the sergeant returned. Then the sergeant could help her.

"And also watch me?" asked Marion, ironically.

"Of course," answered Hogarth. "We're watching everybody."

Rutter indulged in one of his periodic explosions.

"Tell us something we don't know!" he cried. "How much longer are you going to keep us under observation?"

"Well, I won't give you a date," Hogarth replied, "but certainly until you have all been searched. One moment, sergeant."

He moved to the body, and began the search there, quickly examining the contents of the dead man's pockets. The only article he retained was a grey envelope containing a single sheet of paper which, after a swift scrutiny, he slipped into his own pocket. The envelope was addressed to John Coleby in printing letters, and the stamp was slightly askew.

"Right, sergeant—carry on," he said.

The Reverend Eldred Dixon cleared his throat.

"I suppose—er—I suppose this—search is quite necessary?" he stammered.

"I don't do unnecessary things, sir," responded Hogarth.

"Quite so, quite so. I should never suggest—but—er—you mean—everybody?"

"Who do you suggest should be excepted?"

"Er—quite so, quite so."

The clergyman's wife darted an angry glance at him as he subsided. Rutter attempted to succeed where the clergyman had failed.

"You're not exceeding your duty by any chance, inspector?" he inquired.

"There has been a murder by poison, and an attempted murder by shooting," returned Hogarth. "Am I supposed to take your question seriously?"

"Of course we've got to be searched," agreed Peter. "I'm raising no objection."

"Ay, we'll be needing to find that revolver," nodded MacPherson, "but I'm thinking, inspector, the one who fired it has had plenty of opportunity to get rid of it—before you came along to keep an eye on us."

Rather impatiently, Marion interposed, "The revolver has been found." Eyes swung round to her. "It was under the table, in front of my chair."

"And is now," Hogarth added, "in the cloakroom, where Mr. Smith is examining it for finger-prints, but the revolver isn't all I'm interested in. Besides finding who fired the revolver, I have to find who poisoned Mr. Coleby. And who put out the lights. And who locked Mr. Coleby in the library. Were they all done by the same person——"

"That's no' possible!" asserted MacPherson.

"In which case, we may assume that more than one person may be concerned in the crime, and that the actual murderer had an accomplice."

"What about the butler?" said Rutter.

"Or any other of the servants," answered Hogarth. "I'm not forgetting them. They will all have to be interviewed later."

"And searched!"

"It wouldn't surprise me."

The search of the guests did not begin until the paralysed father and the dead son had been conveyed to their respective bedrooms. Then, while the men submitted to the indignity in the dining-room, the women filed into the drawing-room, led by Sergeant Brown, who in the absence of a policewoman permitted them to search each other. During any delicate operations he discreetly turned his back, trusting to their honour and their good sense to conduct the business thoroughly. When Jenny MacPherson asked what they were supposed to be looking for, he told her, "Anything that don't seem natural." Having no wife, and lacking a complete knowledge of women's equipment, he admitted privately to himself that his own eye might not have been qualified to detect the genuine from the spurious.

In the dining-room, Hogarth dealt with the men in the order in which they sat round the table, beginning with Peter.

Peter's pockets revealed nothing of interest beyond two third-class return halves to London and John Coleby's letter of invitation. "You can read it," said Peter. Hogarth did so, and commented, "Your uncle says it may be to your advantage to come. How did you interpret that?"

"Well—as you've gathered, we'd had a quarrel," answered Peter.

"And——?"

"I thought it might be an advantage to make the quarrel up."

"What sort of an advantage?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just social? Or business, or financial?"

"You needn't wrap it up," retorted Peter, flushing.

"You're thinking about his will."

"Yes."

"Well, I can't tell you anything about it."

"Do you know whether he has left you anything or not?"

"No. I don't."

"Had your uncle any nearer relatives?"

"No."

"Do you know where the will is?"

"If it's where it used to be, in a locked drawer in the library."

"You know the drawer?"

"The one it used to be, as I've said."

"And the key?"

Peter shook his head. "I wouldn't know that. I've not been here for about a year. You'd better ask Miss Lacey."

The Reverend Eldred Dixon came next. He grew painfully pink, and gulped when, compelled by the inspector's insistent eye, he drew out a fat wallet.

"You—er—don't want to see inside?" he muttered, unhappily.

"If you please," answered Hogarth.

Inside were a number of new one-pound notes. Hogarth estimated the packet to contain a hundred, and a quick glance at the first and last notes confirmed the guess.

"You carry plenty about with you," he commented.

Suddenly showing a little spirit, the clergyman retorted:

"Why not? If I choose?"

"As you say, sir. You don't smoke?"

"Eh?"

"You have no cigarette case."

"I do not smoke."

When Hogarth moved to Rutter, he was greeted with a frank glare.

"Your turn, Mr. Rutter, if you don't mind."

"Or if I do! Well, have it your own way!" snapped Rutter. "I *do* smoke."

He pulled out a case, opened it, closed it, and thrust it back again.

If he had had his way that would have concluded the search, as far as he was concerned, but Hogarth did not let him have his way, and was adamant against all objections. He searched Rutter very thoroughly, reading a business letter without asking for permission—it was a letter from a London firm making an appointment for that day—and showing more interest in a small scrap of paper than it appeared to deserve.

"Did you keep the appointment to which this letter from Hoad and Felgate refers?" he asked.

"I did," answered Rutter. "I expect your next question will be to ask what it was about?"

"Probably about soups and sauces, since they are in the same line of business as yourself."

"Oh! You know that?"

"Everybody knows Hoad and Felgate's products, and your own office in Ricester is only half a dozen doors from the police station—opposite Mr. Coleby's. By the way, did this

interview have anything to do with Mr. Coleby's business ? ”

“ Why should it ? ”

“ Only because he also was in the same line. What time did you get back from London ? ”

“ What time ? ” exclaimed Rutter. “ What the devil does that matter ? ”

“ I am more likely to consider it matters if you have any objection to telling me,” countered Hogarth.

“ I've not the slightest objection.” In spite of this he paused, and Leonard in particular noted the pause, before he went on, “ I got in by the 7 o'clock train. Yes, that's right—7 o'clock.”

Leonard's interest grew. He knew it was not right. James Rutter had alighted at Ricester Station from the same train as himself.

“ Seven o'clock,” repeated Hogarth. “ And what time did you get here ? ”

“ Eh ? I'm damned if I remember ! ”

“ Mebbe I can help you, inspector, if it's imporrntant,” said MacPherson. “ Dinner was at eight, and I and my daughter arrived at a quarter to. Mr. Rutter was here then.”

“ Yes, that's right, I'd just arrived,” exclaimed Rutter quickly. “ A moment or two before.”

“ Another lie,” thought Leonard. “ He was here ten minutes before.” But he held his peace.

“ That was smart work,” commented Hogarth.

“ I can be as smart as you when I want to,” retorted Rutter. He was clearly rattled. “ I came right on.”

“ I see. And did you interview Messrs. Hoad and Felgate in London in evening dress ? ”

“ What ? Look here, what are you getting at ? I came from London on that train—a porter saw me—but of course I dashed back home first for a change. Now listen to me, inspector ! I know you think you're doing your duty, don't get me wrong about that, but all you're actually doing is just wasting time, and I've had about enough of this——”

“ You're not helping yourself, Mr. Rutter,” interrupted Hogarth, calmly. “ Where did you have tea ? ”

Rutter took a deep breath.

“ A fat lot of time I had for tea ! ” he rasped. “ What makes you think I had any tea ? ”

“ This little bill. To-day's date. Station hotel. Possibly you didn't mean to preserve it when you changed your pockets, but in your hurry you may have included everything, even, I noticed, to a bar of chocolate. How do you account for the bill, if you didn't have tea ? ”

"Well, as a matter of fact, I remember, I did have a quick cup," replied Rutter, his forehead damp.

"Just one?"

"What?"

"The bill is made out for two persons."

"That's right—I met a friend, and we tossed a couple down together."

"Your friend could verify that."

"Eh? Well, naturally——"

"May I know his name?"

"I don't know his name. Or where he lives. Just a travelling companion I met on the train."

"Well, we can verify it if necessary by the person who served you. Meanwhile, the facts you ask me to accept are that you arrived at Ricester Station at 7 p.m., had a cup of tea with a friend at the Station Hotel, went home—I know the address, you live on the top floor over your office—changed from day to evening clothes, and then drove here, reaching here before 7.45. That is, all in less than three-quarters of an hour. Well, perhaps it could be done. But the tea-room at the Station Hotel closes at 6."

Rutter turned scarlet as the inspector moved round the table and came to Ted Snagg. The miserable little man was trembling visibly.

"Your nerves are not in good order, Mr. Snagg," said Hogarth, ruthlessly.

"This'd upset anybody," gulped Snagg.

The contents of Snagg's pockets, comprised a latch-key, a handkerchief, a cheap cigarette-case, a pencil stump, a folded sheet of paper, and eight shillings and twopence. The folded sheet of paper was the *pièce de résistance*, for when Hogarth unfolded it he saw that it bore an elaborate design.

"What's this?" he asked.

He had to repeat the question, for Snagg's tongue seemed frozen.

"You—you wouldn't understand it," stuttered Snagg at last.

"That's why I'm asking you to explain it," retorted Hogarth.

Leonard found himself watching Rutter. "That fellow's as terrified as Snagg!" he reflected. "What's between these two?"

After another pause, Snagg made another effort.

"A piece of furniture," he said. "I'm working one out."

"I see. Your own design, eh?"

"That's it."

"What kind of furniture is it?"

"What?"

"Didn't you hear?"

"A sort of cupboard. A big one. Drawers and shelves and things." Suddenly Snagg's voice rose to a piteous whine. "I said you wouldn't understand it! How could you, without knowing the way I work, and what I mean by——"

"All right, all right," interrupted Hogarth. "Just tell me one thing. What do you mean by that cross?"

"Cross? Where?" Snagg's head shot forward, as though he had never seen the cross before. "Oh! That! Well, see, that's where the next bit is going."

Hogarth nodded grimly, and put the sheet in his pocket. Snagg made no protest. He was too limp. Rutter looked for a moment as though he were going to protest for him, but if so he changed his mind. He knew Hogarth was exceeding the rules. So did Hogarth.

Beyond his handkerchief, his keys and his money, Rodney Forsyth's pockets contained only a small Temple edition of *Hamlet*. The text was heavily marked and underlined, and inside the cover was stuck a photograph of himself in the name-part. It was a strikingly handsome photograph, recalling the actor's heyday. In spite of the subject's very obvious consciousness of his own good looks, a not uncommon factor in pictures of famous actors, and also of a disturbing quality in the eyes—and this again could logically have been ascribed to the psychology of the role—the face compelled one by its attraction, and was in pathetic contrast to its present travesty. Hogarth was not a Shakespearean scholar, but as he regarded the early photograph, a quotation came to him: "Look on this picture—and on this!" Gravely he handed the volume back.

"An excellent little scene," murmured Forsyth.

"I'm afraid this time we are up against reality," replied Hogarth.

"The only reality, sir," answered the actor, "lies in the mind. You have finished with me?"

"Yes—for the moment."

"For the moment? I note the implication. Well, sir, you will not find me wanting when our next scene is to be played. Is it to be the arrest scene, or the repudiation scene, or another murder scene? The play goes on. I have never missed a cue yet."

Leonard came next. He smiled as the detective approached him, and Hogarth refrained just in time from smiling back. He liked this tall bronzed fellow from the other side of the

world, the only guest not in evening dress, but he must not show partiality; and, despite this private favouritism, the Australian worried him. He was not, Hogarth was convinced, a straight case.

"You must be getting giddy," said Leonard. "I'm afraid you won't find my pockets particularly interesting."

"I hope not," replied Hogarth.

He could allow himself that official courtesy. But the hope was not fulfilled. In the Australian's left side-pocket, the detective's practised fingers closed on a small thin bottle. Closed, and stayed still for a few seconds. Leonard watched him curiously.

"Well?" he inquired.

Hogarth did not answer, but withdrew the bottle, keeping it half-concealed in his hand as it emerged. Only Leonard saw it besides himself, and endured a moment of consternation. But the consternation was quickly controlled, and an instant later the bottle had found a new home in the pocket of the detective. It was so smoothly and neatly done that the movement was only noticed by one person beyond themselves.

Had old Adam Coleby still been in the room, it might have been noticed by two.

Hogarth completed his search of Leonard, the rest of it proving as dull as Leonard had predicted, and then wound up with MacPherson, from whom he drew a blank. He had just concluded when the dining-room door opened, and Sergeant Brown poked his head in.

"Clean bill, sir, the lot," he announced. "I'll be back in a minute."

He left the door wide, and the four women trooped in. Two of them looked flushed and upset from their experience—Mrs. Dixon and Phyllis Coleby. The other two had retained their composure, although only Jenny MacPherson's was natural. "Behind that mask," thought Hogarth, as he watched Marion Lacey enter from the hall, "there's something horrible going on—something I don't know anything about yet—but am going to find out!"

Suddenly, while waiting for the sergeant's return, and anticipating a moment he had intended to delay till a little later, he said:

"I noticed scent around the fuse-boxes. Numero Cinque."

It was Jenny who answered him.

"That's a clever guess—if it's right—for a man! Would you be in the business, now?"

"Not in the way you imply, Miss MacPherson," Hogarth

responded, adding with a smile, "But it's true we do follow scents."

"I use Numero Cinque," said Marion, meeting the detective's eyes.

"Ah!"

"I expect you knew it."

"I have noticed it."

"Then you must also have noticed that I was with you when you went to the fuse-boxes. It was I who took you there."

"Quite so," replied Hogarth. "And almost at once I asked you to go and send the sergeant to me. Do you think you were there long enough for your scent to impregnate the little curtain in front of the fuse-boxes?"

"That's for you to decide, inspector," she answered. "If I was, then I don't suppose there is anything surprising in your point—and if I wasn't, then probably I wouldn't have been there long enough on any previous occasion you may have in mind."

"She beat me that time," thought Hogarth. "Fairly and squarely!"

Sergeant Brown returned. He was carrying three coats over his arm, and he looked important.

"Perhaps the three gentlemen who own these coats will kindly identify them?" he said.

Hogarth watched the sergeant with a certain amusement as well as interest. Brown had acted under his instructions in examining the coats, but he was now going beyond his orders. His superior decided not to interfere, however, and to let him have his moment.

The three owners responded. They were Dixon, Leonard and MacPherson. Beginning with the clergyman's coat, Brown drew out a plain grey envelope. It was stamped, but not addressed. There was nothing in it, and the flap had not been stuck down.

The Reverend Eldred Dixon regarded it blankly and apparently without comprehension. Hogarth fixed his eye on the stamp, which was slightly askew. He awarded Brown a good mark for his observation.

The clergyman's mouth opened and closed. He looked as though he did not understand anything—either the envelope or its significance. He chose silence as his safest ally.

Handing Hogarth the envelope, and placing the coat over a chair, Brown took from the second—Leonard's—two pieces of pasteboard. They were portions of a torn photograph of a young woman.

"Anything to say about that, sir?" inquired Brown.

Leonard stared at the torn picture incredulously, colour slowly mounting to his cheeks. For an instant he looked murderous. Hogarth, his interest quickening, watched him quietly.

"Did you find it—like this?" asked Leonard, in a hard voice.

"Yes, sir," replied the sergeant. "I didn't tear it myself."

Leonard took a deep breath, controlled himself, and turned to Hogarth.

"No—I've nothing to say about it," he said. "Yet."

Then he turned back to the sergeant, and held out his hand. After an inquiring glance at Hogarth, who nodded, Brown gave Leonard the torn pieces.

"Thank you," said Leonard, and dropped them into his pocket.

"And what's *my* Christmas present to be?" asked MacPherson.

It was a small, round, empty, cardboard pill-box. MacPherson smiled as the sergeant produced it.

"A month ago I had a wisdom tooth out with novocaine," he said, "and the dentist gave me some tablets to ease the pain. I threw away the tablets, but I kept the box, thinking mebbe it would come in handy."

"And did it?" inquired Rutter.

"Oh, ay," answered MacPherson, sarcastically. "I filled the box with cynaide of potassium."

"I have another article here," said the sergeant. "It was in the hall, by the overturned chair."

He held up a gentleman's handkerchief. As no one claimed it, Hogarth glanced at Rutter.

"Yours, I think," he said.

"Oh, and what makes you think that?" demanded Rutter, truculently.

"Every man here has a handkerchief but you," replied Hogarth.

"What? Well, I—I left mine in my coat pocket." He stared at the handkerchief. "That's not mine."

"Is your coat in the cloakroom?" asked Hogarth.

"It is."

"I didn't find any handkerchief in any coat pocket," stated the sergeant. "And I went very thoroughly through the lot."

Rutter swore under his breath. "I tell you, that's where I left it!" he repeated, loudly. "What are you trying to pin on me?"

"You'll swear this isn't your handkerchief, then?" inquired Hogarth.

"Yes! What? Blazes, how do I know? There's millions of handkerchiefs like that one. No mark on it."

"Can you see from where you are that there is no mark on it?"

"Well, is there?"

"Yes. The initial R." Rutter became red. "Do you know anything about the overturned chair?"

"No!" shouted Rutter. "Or how the handkerchief got where you say you found it!"

"Does anybody here?"

A silence suggested that nobody did. Hogarth put another question to the company.

"Does any one here remember whether the chair was over when you all came into the dining-room at eight?"

After another short silence, Leonard replied:

"I'm pretty sure it wasn't over—I think I should have noticed it."

"And probably some of the others would," nodded Hogarth.

"Can you remember anything about it, Mr. Boyd, when you went out into the hall a few minutes before nine to bring Mr. Snagg back? Was there a scuffle, and did it go over then, by any chance?"

"There wasn't any scuffle, as I think I told you," answered Leonard, "and anyhow we turned in the other direction, towards the front door. That is, to the left. Yes, I do remember now. I happened to see the chair, and it was in its correct position."

"Remarkable!" exclaimed Rutter, who rarely missed a chance to try and trip anybody up. "You turned to the left, and the chair was on the right, and you saw the chair!"

"I saw it when coming back," retorted Leonard, "when it was ahead of me. Do you mind?"

Hogarth went on:

"I think you were the next to leave the room, Miss Lacey?"

"You mean, when I went out to telephone?" she asked.

"Yes. That was a few minutes after nine."

She thought for a few moments, then said:

"It was over then."

"You are quite sure?"

"Quite sure. Yes, I'm quite sure."

"Did you mention it?"

"No."

"Can you remember why not?"

"I think so. There was so much. It was all confusion. The thing I concentrated on was the doctor. I mean, trying to get him. If you think that strange, I can't help it."

"No, I don't think it at all strange," replied Hogarth. "You had no reason to connect the overturned chair with Mr. Coleby's death. All I was trying to do was to establish it as a fact that you really did see it then."

"And I've told you. I know I did."

"Very well. Then the chair was overturned during the ten minutes between five minutes to nine and five minutes past."

"And now that important point's been settled," interposed Rutter, "and everything's cleared up, can you let us all go home? Or are we here for ever?"

There came a knock on the door. The sergeant poked his head out, and then withdrew it sharply.

"Constable Ash wants to report something, sir," he said.

"Yes? What is it?" called Hogarth.

The constable came into the room. He looked even more important than the sergeant had looked entering with the coats, though he bore himself with the praiseworthy stolidity of his kind.

"Searching around outside, sir," he announced, "I came upon a motor-bike against a wall at the back. It had been in shadow before, but now the moonlight was on it. BXT51999!"

"I was nearly run down by a motor-bike on my way here," interrupted Leonard. "The last two figures were 99."

"Go on, constable," said Hogarth. "No, wait a moment. Did any one here arrive on a motor-bike?"

The silence to which Hogarth was growing accustomed greeted his question.

"Apparently not," he said. "Yes, constable?"

"I think I've found the rider, sir," continued the constable. "See, I thought I might have a look round for him, in case he was anywhere about."

"And you found him, you say?"

"I found someone, sir."

"Where?"

"In the moat."

Hogarth turned to Rutter.

"Please don't let us have any more nonsensical talk about going home," he said sharply. "I want my orders obeyed, and without any argument. All in the drawing-room, please. Come along, Ash, show me the spot. Sergeant, fetch Dr. Dawson, and follow on."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TRAGEDY NO. TWO

THE COOL NIGHT AIR was a relief, and Hogarth breathed it gratefully. The dining-room—now locked, till he returned to it later—had been sultry with its heavy oppressive atmosphere of death, and although he was now on his way to another death the open, evening-scented environment made it seem less dismal. Moonlight illuminated low box hedges ; gleamed in the water of the moat that made an outer diagram of the house, faithfully following all its configurations ; cast deep velvet shadows. Ghosts of imagination flitted through the old-world gardens, ghosts with their passions of love and hate long cooled, peaceful reflections of finished lives. Were these vacant husks all that remained, or had the tenants merely been freed for fresh experience ? In that case, death might be a happy thing. . . .

"There's the motor-bike, sir," said the constable.

Hogarth nodded, but did not pause. He was more interested in the alleged rider.

"And the man's in the water just beyond that little bridge?" he inquired.

"Yes, sir," answered Ash, surprised.

"You're wondering how I guessed," said Hogarth, replying to the unasked question. "You may learn presently."

The sergeant and Dr. Dawson joined them, rather out of breath.

"What's all this ?" grunted the doctor. "Seems I'm never to work without interruptions !"

"Well, you've lived long enough to know," said Hogarth. "Anything more to report about Coleby ?"

"Yes, he's been poisoned," responded the doctor, satirically. "He's been poisoned."

"You don't say," smiled Hogarth. "Well, now we're coming to another who's been drowned. Unless, of course, I'm anticipating evidence."

The little bridge by which they had crossed the moat had been reached from a passage at the back of the kitchen. The bridge by which they found the drowned man was also at the back but on the other side of the house. It led, Hogarth found later, to the french windows of a large unused breakfast-room immediately beneath the library and situated at a corner of the building'

"There he is," said the constable, though there was no need now for a guide. "Drowned, ain't he?"

They got him out before any reply was made. He was dead beyond dispute. The doctor shook his head as he started his examination.

"No good trying artificial respiration here," he said. "We'd never get the breath back into his body."

"Dead too long?" inquired Hogarth, staring at the man's forehead. "Or—didn't he die by drowning?"

There was a large ugly gash on the forehead. Hogarth turned his eyes towards the bridge, and fixed them on a brick protuberance.

"He struck that just before he went in," he said. "Go back to the house, Ash, and ask Miss Lacey and Mr. Boyd to come here. And you'd better stay in the drawing-room to see that no one else moves out."

"Very good, sir," answered the constable, and departed.

"Do you agree I'm right?" asked Hogarth, after the constable had gone. "About that wound?"

"Expect you are," replied the doctor. "It could account for it. He's bled pretty badly."

"And possibly entered the water unconscious?"

"No. Probably."

"So, even if he could swim, he'd go under."

He stepped to the water's edge and gazed down at the gravel. It had been badly disturbed, and very clearly indicated the spot from where the man had fallen in. After making mental measurements and gauging distances, Hogarth was satisfied that the spot fitted into his theory.

"Yes, he was standing just here," he said, "facing this end of the bridge. That would bring his forehead towards the brickwork when he fell. Now, did he fall in, or was he pushed in?"

"From the condition of that gravel, sir," suggested the sergeant, "there seems to have been a bit of a fuss."

"I think there was a fuss, although of course, even if you fell in by accident, Brown, your feet would make marks. It's not conclusive. Have you any opinion yet, doctor, how long he has been dead?"

"Well, I won't commit myself at the moment," Dawson replied, "but I might put it roughly at—say—between four and five hours. But that's a guess. Don't quote it as official. It's not so easy to judge these things when a body's stayed in the water. I don't think you'll find I'm far wrong, though."

"Have you any idea who it is, sir?" asked the sergeant.

"I should say my idea there is the same as yours, Brown,"

Hogarth returned, "but that's only a guess, too. If we're right, we'll know in a minute."

"Getting back to the other affair," said the sergeant, "do you think the victim of No. Two Tragedy could have caused No. One Tragedy?"

Dr. Dawson snorted.

"As I have just given my opinion that No. Two died at least three hours before No. One," he snapped, "No. Two must have administered the poison posthumously!"

Hogarth smiled, and defended his subordinate.

"You have also just told us not to accept your opinion officially," he remarked. "And then, poison could be prepared well before the event. We can't rule out the idea of an accomplice—in fact, a great deal seems to have been done, and some of it in a very short time, to be all the work of one man. This fellow may have been a part of the cause, though I certainly have no idea yet how he fits in."

"How about this for a line?" said the sergeant. "There's two of 'em on the job, and they meet here to go over final plans. There's a quarrel—*that's* common enough among accomplices—and one shoves t'other in the water. And—er—then goes inside and, when the time comes, finishes the job."

Hogarth regarded the sergeant thoughtfully, then took a sheet of paper from his pocket. It was Snagg's alleged drawing of a piece of furniture—surely the most extraordinary piece ever designed.

"Have a look at that, Brown," he said, handing it over, "and tell me what you make of it in the moonlight."

Brown blinked and screwed his eyes.

"Looks like a sort of a plan," he muttered.

"You're getting warm," nodded Hogarth. "Keep going."

All at once Brown emitted a low whistle.

"Crumbs! It's a plan of the grounds!"

"Yes? Go on?"

"Well—haven't I said it?"

"You haven't said anything about that little cross."

"Cross? Where? Oh, yes, I've got it. . . . Holy Moses! The cross marks—where we're standing!"

"Exactly."

"Where did you find this?" asked Brown.

"On our friend Mr. Ted Snagg," replied Hogarth.

"Then he looks to be for it again——"

"Whoa! Not so fast, sergeant," interrupted Hogarth, warningly. "We must think in terms of the present—or talk in those terms, anyhow, whatever we may think. Don't forget that. Here come Miss Lacey and Mr. Boyd."

They came through the breakfast-room, and crossed the little bridge. Leonard laid a steadying hand on Marion's arm as she looked at the sopping body on the grass.

"Do you know him?" Hogarth asked quietly.

It was ten seconds before Marion replied, in a stifled voice, "I think so—yes."

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Codrington."

"The guest who did not turn up?" inquired Hogarth, after exchanging glances with the sergeant.

The gold ear-rings glinted in the moonlight as Marion nodded her head.

Hogarth waited a little while for her to make some addition, but as she did not, he said:

"Well, as you see, Mr. Codrington did turn up, though not at the actual dinner-table. You took his place, Mr. Boyd."

"That's so," answered Leonard. "And is that why you've sent for me?"

"It may be one of the reasons. But another is that you mentioned just before I came out here that you had been nearly run down by a motor-bike. Mr. Codrington evidently arrived here on a motor-bike. BXT51999. You recalled that the last two figures of the one that shaved you were 99."

Leonard moved a little closer to the sodden corpse.

"This looks like the same man," he said, "but you realise I can't identify him with absolute certainty. A man in motor-cycling kit passing you at speed doesn't make a very clear impression on you—especially when you're dodging out of his way, and you've never seen him before."

"And you've never seen this man before?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Are you suggesting that he tried to run you down?"

"What, deliberately? No! He just seemed in a bit of a hurry, and my experience of motor-cyclists in a hurry is that they don't pay much attention to anything else on the road."

"You were walking from Ricester, I understand?"

"That's correct."

"A rather long walk."

"I missed the last taxi at the station."

"I suppose you didn't meet the motor-cycle? It overtook you?"

"Correct."

"Do you remember the time?"

"Near enough, I think. I left the station at half-past five, and must have been walking about twenty minutes when he shot by."

"Ten minutes to six. If he came straight here, he'd arrive round about six, or a few minutes past. That's on the way to five hours ago. Fits your timing, doctor." The police surgeon nodded. "Tell me, Mr. Boyd—did you meet anything else on the road?"

"I met that taxi, on its way back," said Leonard.

Hogarth turned to Marion. "Would that taxi have brought any of the guests, do you think?" he asked.

She started. Her eyes had been glazed. Hogarth had to repeat the question, and while he did so she got hold of herself.

"Mr. and Mrs. Coleby—Mr. and Mrs. Peter Coleby—arrived by taxi," she answered. "It might have been theirs."

"What time did they arrive?"

"I can't say, exactly."

"I'm not asking you to say exactly. You've probably got some general idea?"

"Oh, yes. I see." Her eyes kept wandering back to the figure on the ground. Now she wrenched them away. "The time. It was after five. Yes, well after five. It must have been, because they came on the 4.55 from London—I remember they said so—which would make them get here by about twenty past, I expect."

"Thank you. And what did they do when they arrived here?"

"Do?"

"You received them?"

"Oh, yes, of course. Forgive me if I seem stupid. All this—what did they do? Yes, I gave them some tea. I'd had mine."

"Did you stay with them while they had their tea?"

"Yes."

"All the while?"

"Yes. Why? Yes."

"Did they have tea almost at once?"

"What? I think so. No, I don't mean at once. Nearly at once."

Leonard felt worried. Was she going to crack up at last? He had admired this strange woman's control all the evening, and he had a queer desire that it should continue. He liked her, though he was less sure whether, granted more knowledge, he would approve of her.

"Nearly at once," repeated Hogarth. "That means, a few minutes?"

"Yes."

"And were they long at tea?"

"Not very. Well, a little while."

"Twenty minutes. Half an hour?"

"About half an hour."

"I suppose Mr. Coleby—their uncle——"

"He wasn't there. He didn't see them till dinner. Or anyone."

"Kept out of the way, eh?"

"He didn't come down."

"Well, and after tea? We're getting towards six o'clock now. That's a little over four hours ago. What did they do?"

"I took them to their bedroom. They were staying the night."

"The only ones?"

"To stay? Yes."

"Did you remain with them while they unpacked?"

"No. I showed them where to put things, of course."

"And then?"

"I went to my own room. I had a lot to do. Is there much more? My head's aching."

"I'm sorry. We'll get back to Mr. Codrington. Was he a friend of Mr. Coleby's?"

"What? Oh! No, not a particular friend. I think there was some business connection—I'm not sure."

"Did he often come to the house?"

"Here, you mean?" She paused. Suddenly she was very still. "No. Only once."

"That was the time you met him, I suppose."

"Yes."

"The only time?"

Again she paused.

"Yes, the only time," she said.

"Was it a business visit?"

"Yes."

"Then I don't suppose you yourself saw him for long?"

"Oh, no. Just a few minutes."

"But long enough to identify him? You are quite sure this is Mr. Codrington?"

She stared at Hogarth, as though the question startled her. Then she replied, quietly:

"I am quite sure it is Mr. Codrington."

Leonard felt a slight pressure against his shoulder. She was beginning to sway. He touched her hand, and the touch steadied her.

"That's all for the moment, Miss Lacey," said Hogarth.

"I'm sorry I have had to keep you so long on what must be

to you a very unpleasant business. Will you and Mr. Boyd now return to the drawing-room? I'll be seeing you both again presently."

They returned to the house through the breakfast-room, leaving the french window open at the doctor's request. The doctor had asked permission to conclude his examination of the body inside.

"Yes, you can do it while I'm interviewing the servants," said Hogarth. "They're next on the list."

"What did you make of them two, sir?" inquired the sergeant, after they had gone. "I'd like to know all that Miss Lacey knows!"

"Yes, we might be half-way there, if we did," answered Hogarth.

"Or all the way!"

"I doubt that."

The staff did not provide much in the way of information. They all appeared to have perfect alibis in so far as events between 8.45 and 9.5 were concerned—a period described by Sergeant Brown as "the fatal twenty minutes." At 8.45, after filling the wine-glasses, the butler and the maid had descended to the kitchen, rejoining the rest of the staff—there was not a single absentee—to discuss the gloomy occasion. They had heard Leonard and Snagg in the hall just before nine, the voices floating down to them via the basement stairs. They quoted snatches of the conversation which agreed with what Hogarth had already been told. "We all felt that upset!" declared the cook. "And *you* wasn't no better than the rest of us, William," she added to the butler. "Dropped a plate, he did, up in the dining-room—said it was like serving in a sepulchre!"

"And then, when the lights went out——!" exclaimed the maid, Celia. "Did I scream!"

"*That* you did!" corroborated the butler, grimly. "A nice time you gave us—and me wanting to go up and see to the dining-room!"

"Why couldn't you?" asked Hogarth.

"She collapsed on top of me!" he answered. "There was a to-do down here, I'll say! Talk about confusion!"

"I nearly had hysterics meself," said the housemaid. "See, it was this coming after all what had been before."

"She means the way the table was set, and everybody being on edge," explained the cook.

Hogarth nodded. "I understand. Did any one leave the kitchen?"

"No one, sir," asserted the butler.

"Could you be sure of that? In the dark?"

"Oh, I soon had a candle lit," declared the cook, "and the next thing I did was to have a count, to be sure none of *my* lot had been up to any monkey-tricks. We were all here, all of us. And with Celia in a faint, and having to fetch water to her, and Julia jabbering like a monkey-house——"

"Oh, I never!" protested the housemaid.

"You did! We had our hands full, sir, you can believe *me*!"

"When we'd got things straightened out a bit," the butler went on with the story, "I found a lamp, and began to go up with it, but I met Miss Lacey in the hall—she'd been telephoning—and she sent me down again, after taking the lamp, and told me we were all to stay in the kitchen till further instructions."

"Which we did till your constable came along," concluded the cook, "and *he'll* tell you we've stayed here waiting ever since!"

There was faint indignation in her tone. Hogarth smiled sympathetically.

"You have all been very patient," he said, "but at times like this one has to be. They've been equally patient upstairs"—this was not quite truthful—"so you've been following a good example." He turned to the butler. "You mentioned that you and Celia filled all the wine-glasses?"

He spoke casually, but the butler's eyes became slightly apprehensive.

"That's right, sir," answered William. "Those were Mr. Coleby's instructions." He paused, then went on, "I took one side of the table, and Celia took the other."

"Which side did Celia take?"

"The door side."

"And who filled Mr. Coleby's glass? Mr. John Coleby's?"

"I did, sir."

"From the same bottle as you used for the rest?"

"Yes, sir. There was ample in it. We'd opened two fresh ones."

"Where are the bottles now?"

"In the pantry."

"Where were they opened?"

"In the dining-room."

"Just before you filled the glasses?"

"Yes, sir."

"Two good pops," added Celia. "I had to be quick or mine'd have slopped over."

"When you filled Mr. Coleby's glass," Hogarth continued

to the butler, "do you remember whether his glass was empty? Or was there some champagne still in it?"

"It was empty, sir."

"You are quite sure of that?"

"Quite sure. I noticed. Butlers get the habit, sir, of noticing little things like that."

"I expect so. When you say 'empty,' do you mean perfectly empty?"

"Yes, sir."

"Without any drain of moisture at all? Did you notice as closely as that?"

William thought hard, then replied, "It might have been a new glass, sir."

"Was it a new glass?" asked Hogarth.

The butler looked astonished.

"Why—no, sir!" he answered. "It—couldn't have been!"

"Never assume," said Hogarth, "that because a thing is improbable it is impossible. Well, I've no more questions to ask at the moment—but perhaps one of you can think of something else that might be helpful?"

He paused inquiringly, and suddenly noticed that Celia was nudging Julia.

"Yes? Let me have it."

"Aren't you the limit, Celia!" muttered Julia. "It was jest, sir, that a bird flew into my window this morning, and that's supposed to be a death."

"Only one bird?" said Hogarth. "Well, sergeant, find those two champagne bottles, take charge of them, and follow me up to the library."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

NERVES IN THE DRAWING-ROOM

FROM THE HALL, as they were returning to the drawing-room, Leonard and Marion heard the harsh voice of James Rutter. It bore its usual rasping, querulous quality.

"What I want to know is this! And I should think we'd all want to know it! Who is the fellow?"

"We've been guessing it's Codrington," came Peter's reply, "and if it is, well, I expect we'll know more about him soon enough."

"I'm not talking about him now," retorted Rutter, irritably.

"I'm talking about the chap who's been sitting all the evening in his place. Who is he? What is he? Where's he come from? There seemed to be some jiggery-pokery business when that damned detective went through his pockets—by God, he didn't tone down the publicity when going through *mine*!—and did you spot Boyd's expression when that torn photograph was taken out of his coat? I did, if you didn't! Picture of his best girl, I expect—and *was* he ripe to murder the person who'd ruined it?"

"You didna look too angelic yoursel', Mr. Rutter," remarked MacPherson, "when the sergeant confronted you with your handkerchief."

"Bah! Leave that!" exclaimed Rutter. "Anyway, you all know who *I* am—whether you use my damned sauces or not! I dare say you're all longing to tell me you prefer Coleby's! You can save your breath! What I'm talking about now is—yes—it's *Boyd's* sauce, gate-crashing among us here like he has. He wasn't invited, so what's he doing here? What's he come for?"

"You'd better ask him to his face, instead of wondering behind his back," came from Jenny, as Leonard and Marion entered the room.

Leonard smiled grimly.

"Thank you, Miss MacPherson," he said, "but it wouldn't be any good, for I wouldn't tell him."

Rutter coloured, but kept his end up.

"Wouldn't be healthy for you, eh, Boyd?" he inquired, insultingly. "If Boyd's your name?"

"You seem to forget, Rutter, that we've a detective in the house," replied Leonard. "Before he lets us go, he'll probably be wanting *all* our stories."

"And—getting 'em?"

"Well, as I was including yours, I'm not so sure. By the way, I had a cup of tea after my train got in this afternoon at the station hotel. I found the occasion quite interesting."

Rutter's colour deepened. Snagg would have lost his if he had had any.

"Do we continue with this conversation?" asked Leonard, significantly.

For the moment, Rutter was silenced. He turned away, glowering, and stared at a picture. But he could not have said afterwards what the picture was. The picture that obliterated it was of the station tea-room.

MacPherson took advantage of the moment to inquire, "Has the person in the moat been identified?"

"Codrington," replied Leonard.

"We were thinking mebbe it was," nodded MacPherson.
"Hey! Catch her!"

Leonard threw out his arms, and was just in time to save Marion from falling to the ground. He had been half-expecting this, and had kept close. He carried the unconscious woman to the couch, and after laying her down he made way for Jenny.

"The poor lady," murmured Jenny. "It's being too much for her."

Phyllis joined Jenny at the couch, and under cover of this diversion Snagg began to slide towards Rutter; but Rutter moved quickly in an opposite direction, to find himself interrupting a whispered conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Dixon. Mr. Dixon immediately raised his voice, in an abortive attempt to cover the fact that he had been whispering, though surely no one without a worried conscience could have conceived this as a sin.

"A terrible evening!" said the clergyman. "Terrible!"

"Yes, two in one night's not so bad," answered Rutter.
"Wonder who's going to be the third?"

"Don't!" exclaimed Mrs. Dixon.

"Er—it is Mr. Codrington—I understand?" said Dixon.

"That's what I understand," replied Rutter. "Know anything about him?"

"No!"

"Nor do I. Nor, apparently, does anybody here—barring I'm ready to bet, *one*!" His voice dropped as he glanced towards Leonard Boyd. "'Nuff said!"

Forsyth strolled across to Constable Ash, standing stolidly by the door.

"And what is your opinion of all this?" asked the actor.

"We don't go in for opinions, sir," answered Ash. "We go for facts."

"Ah! Facts! Precisely! Yet, until a fact is ascertained, it is common to hold an opinion." He looked towards Rutter and the Dixons, then went on:

" 'See what a ready tongue suspicion hath!
He that but fears the thing he would not know
Hath by instinct knowledge from others' eyes,
That what he fear'd is chanced.' "

You perceive the application?"

"Well, there you are," said Ash.

The constable was glad to see Jenny MacPherson approaching. Not because he had any personal interest in Jenny,

despite her attractions, but because he was finding this *tête-à-tête* with Forsyth painful, and was very ready to have it broken up.

"May I take Miss Lacey up to her room, please?" asked Jenny.

"My instructions are that nobody's to leave, miss," answered Ash.

"Yes, I ken that fine, but I'm afraid I only asked you, constable, as a matter of form."

"I beg your pardon, miss?"

"We've just got Miss Lacey out of a faint, and we don't want her to go into another—as I'm thinking she may if she doesn't get out of this room. So I'm taking her up to her ain room, and that's where you'll find me, constable, if ye want me for a fine or imprisonment."

She smiled at him, and he only just managed not to smile back.

"Well, of course, miss, if the lady's ill——"

Jenny did not wait for any more. A minute later she was in the hall, with an arm round Marion Lacey's waist.

Then Sergeant Brown poked his head into the drawing-room.

"Mr. Coleby, please!" he called. "The inspector would like to see you in the library."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SMITH ON THE JOB

ON HIS WAY up to the library from the kitchen, Hogarth stopped at the top of the basement stairs and opened the cloakroom door. Smith turned his head and smiled happily. He was in his element. On a long shelf was a row of wine-glasses, neatly arranged with a name-card in front of each. Divorced from the miniature skulls which originally held them, the name-cards now looked quite innocent. On a small table was the revolver.

"Making any headway?" inquired the inspector.

"Oh, yes," answered Smith. "I've found finger-prints on the gun. Belonging, I think, to different people."

"That's interesting," said Hogarth. "Do you know the people?"

"I know one." Smith pointed to the wine-glass with the name "Edward Snagg" in front of it. "Same on both."

"I like the 'Edward,'" commented Hogarth. "It has a touch of Colbean irony, don't you think? I'll be more interested in the other print, though, if your diagnosis is right."

"Why, sir?"

"Snagg's in this somewhere, but I don't think he fired that shot. Firstly, it came from the other side of the table. The bullet's in the wall behind Boyd's chair, and it couldn't possibly have been fired by any one in Snagg's chair."

"Perhaps Snagg wasn't in his chair," suggested Smith. "The lights were out, weren't they, so no one could see."

"He wasn't in his chair the moment after the shot was fired," returned Hogarth. "He was under the table, close to Miss Lacey's chair. That's where I found the revolver, and Snagg may have handled it while he was crouching there shivering."

"Well, that's an idea."

"I'm guessing the right idea. If his hand touched it, he'd probably lift it to find out what it was—and then put it down again like a hot cake! Which may mean that he didn't put it down exactly where he found it. Have you done Miss Lacey's glass yet?"

Smith nodded. "Nothing doing there. But I've still got three or four more to do yet, so we'll hope on. There's nothing on the main electric switches. They were turned off with gloves or a handkerchief, or the prints were wiped off."

"You didn't find even the sergeant's? He turned 'em on again."

"No. He made a good job of it."

"He'd have had a wiggling from me if he hadn't! How about the library door?"

"Wash-out, sir."

"Anything else?"

Smith shook his head. "These glasses are a tit-bit, but beyond them and the revolver I wouldn't call this case a gold mine—that is, not from my angle. I'll soon be ready for suggestions."

"Well, here are a couple, to go on with," answered Hogarth. Very carefully he took from his pocket the stamped un-addressed envelope and the small thin bottle, extracting the latter gingerly by its firmly-seated cork, with the tip of a finger supporting the bottom in case of accidents. "See what you can find on these. The fact that I'm trusting you with the bottle is a sign of my confidence in you, Smith. You needn't go examining the contents. Your job's on the outside."

Smith looked at the bottle, and whistled softly.

"Where did you get that?" he asked.

"Never mind," replied Hogarth. "I'm asking you to tell me things."

"O.K. But if *you* know where you got that," said Smith, shrewdly, "do you need any more?"

"I need a hell of a lot more," said Hogarth, "and what makes *you* guess what's in it?"

"Well, sir," returned Smith, with a grin, "if it was just ginger-beer, I expect you could trust it to me without any compliments!"

"What I like about you, Smith, is that you're a spot smarter than you look. Presently I may be trusting you with a couple of champagne bottles, but as they'll be empty you shall have those without laurels."

Then Hogarth left the cloakroom, and passed through the dining-room into the library, where he found Sergeant Brown waiting for him. With the sergeant were the two champagne bottles to which Hogarth had just referred.

"What did you make of that little lot downstairs, sir?" asked Brown.

"What did you?" countered Hogarth.

"Well, sir, it didn't seem as if they was holding anything back."

"If they were holding anything back, they'd take care it didn't seem as if they were. How about the butler?"

"You mean—he was a long time going up with that lamp?"

"You've referred to it, not I."

Brown scratched his head. Funny how sometimes, without any reason for it, inspectors got all difficult. However, sergeants are not to question why . . .

"'Course, sir, he explained it," said Brown.

"So he did," nodded Hogarth. "Nice room, this, isn't it? One—two—three—four—five—six bookcases. And one of them right across the wall. Two windows, table before one, desk before the other. Couch by the fireplace. I could spend a week in here very comfortably. Well, unfortunately, we're not here on a holiday. Take those two bottles to Smith, with my compliments, and then ask Mr. Peter Coleby to come in here. And you can sit at the desk with your note-book while we're chatting."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PETER COLEBY

THE FIRST THING Peter saw on entering the library was the back of Sergeant Brown's head. The sergeant was seated at the desk in the curtained window across the room. Then, turning his eyes a little to the left, he found Inspector Hogarth standing by the couch, watching him gravely.

"Sit down, Mr. Coleby, will you?" began Hogarth. Peter did so. "Now, then. Did you poison your uncle?"

"Good God, of course not!" exclaimed Peter, surprised at the direct question.

"Somebody did. If you had, what would have been your motive?"

"Isn't that rather a silly question?" retorted Peter.

"Meaning you don't want to answer it?"

"Oh, I'll answer it! The answer's obvious! There wouldn't have been any motive, so I'd just have been a lunatic."

"I see. You can't think of any possible motive. I am to believe that?"

Peter flushed. It was a habit of which he had always tried in vain to cure himself.

"I suppose you're thinking of that rotten will—like the rest of them!" he growled.

"Do you expect to benefit from it?" inquired Hogarth.

"I did once."

"But not now?"

"I don't know. I know he altered it after the row. Of course, when he invited me to this dinner—you've read his letter to me—it seemed he might have changed his mind again. Yes, but look here! If I thought he was putting me back into the will——"

"And there's no one else obvious?"

"What? No, I can't think of anybody. At least——" He pulled himself up sharply. "Where was I? You've muddled me. I was saying, if I thought he was putting me back into his will, would I come along in hot haste to finish him off before I even knew he'd done it? Even assuming that I had homicidal tendencies?"

"You might need some additional motive before you went to those lengths, Mr. Coleby," Hogarth agreed, with a smile.

"For instance, shall we say, some feeling of animosity, generated by a quarrel."

"Oh—*that*!"

"The row you have just referred to was, I take it, the one that occurred about a year ago."

"Yes," answered Peter, frowning.

"Are you willing to tell me about that? Or not?"

"Will it make any difference if I'm not willing?"

"At the moment you are not forced to tell me anything."

"But you've your own way of getting us to, haven't you?" retorted Peter. "All right. Here goes. . . . I'd always lived here at Leak Hall until then. Ever since I can remember—and even before. You see, my father and mother died when I was a few months old, so this had been my home—I'd never known any other. Well, a couple of years ago Phyllis—my wife—came here as my uncle's secretary. At first she only worked at the office——"

"At Ricester?"

"That's right. Then he started bringing her back here, for his private correspondence as well, and in the end she had a room." He paused. "I don't like talking about all this. Not only for Phyllis's sake, but somehow or other for my uncle's too. After all, when a chap's dead—whatever he was like—well, you know what I mean."

"I understand your feelings perfectly, Mr. Coleby."

"Thanks. Then I'll get on. Phyllis was never really happy here. I soon realised that. Miss Lacey didn't seem to care for her—yes, but that's beside the point. It was my uncle's attitude that got on her nerves. There's—there's nothing modern about Phyllis. I always think she belongs more to—well, perhaps you're getting the idea?"

"You mean, your uncle started making love to her?"

"To put it plainly, yes."

"I'm afraid, Mr. Coleby, we have to put things plainly. Well?"

"Of course, I didn't know about this for a bit—or, by Jove, the row would have happened earlier!" He jumped up from the couch, and began walking up and down. "But one day I found her crying. It was in this very room. I'd come in for a book, and she happened to be alone. She wouldn't tell me what the trouble was, but I began to guess, and a week later—quite by accident, no spying or anything like that—I happened to overhear a darned rotten suggestion he was making. Yes, I admit, I felt murderous all right that time! But all I did was to go in and hit him. Next day I took Phyllis

away—to London—and we got married. . . . That's really about all."

"Except that your uncle cut you out of his will?"

"Oh, yes! I expected that, but he didn't leave me guessing. I had a stinker of a letter, and burnt it without replying." Suddenly he stopped walking up and down, and faced Hogarth squarely. "I'm not making out any special case for myself. Life had been too easy for me here, and maybe I was lazy and took advantage of it. I'd refused to go into my uncle's business, because I loathed the idea of office life, and so when we went to London I was pretty green and we had a bit of a grind. But—we're managing. We don't need my uncle's money—though I'm not saying," he added, "that it wouldn't come in handy!"

"You got a job in London, then?"

"We both got jobs. I in a newspaper office, and my wife—again—as a secretary. But I want her to give hers up. She's not really very strong—not cut out for work of that kind. I—I'd like to see her back here—running the place."

"Despite its associations?"

"We'd soon wipe these out."

"Would that suit Miss Lacey?"

Peter gave the inspector a shrewd glance. "What makes you ask that?"

"You mentioned Miss Lacey a little while ago." There was a silence. Hogarth went on, "Miss Lacey runs the place now?"

"That's right," answered Peter.

"Has she been here all along?"

"All along?"

"All the time you were here?"

"Oh, I see. No, she came five or six years ago." He paused, then added, "Sort of nurse-housekeeper."

"She looks after old Mr. Coleby?"

"One of her duties, yes."

"Did he become paralysed five or six years ago?"

"Oh, no. He's been paralysed ever since I remember. In fact, I've never known him different. I believe it was round about the time I was born. My uncle found him like that when he got back from abroad."

"Oh—he's been abroad?"

"Yes. When he was a boy he ran off to Australia."

"Australia. That's interesting. Do you know how long he was there?"

"About ten years, I think. He told me once that he was fifteen when he went off. He got fed up with home life. Yes,

but I'm talking too much—all this is beside the point, isn't it ? ”

“ I don't think so,” answered Hogarth. “ Do you know why he got fed up ? ”

Peter frowned, and hesitated.

“ Anything you tell me will be helpful,” said Hogarth. “ Particularly anything that assists me to get a line of your uncle. He had a pretty independent character, didn't he ? ”

“ Independent ! My hat ! I should say so ! ” Peter stared at the couch, then sat down again. “ Had to have his own way. If anybody stood in his path, he'd got his own method of letting 'em know it.”

“ What was the method ? ”

“ Oh, I don't mean anything definite—just that, somehow or other, he made 'em feel small. *And* enjoyed it ! He was a bit—well—don't quite know how to express it.”

“ Or don't want to express it ? Sadistic ? ”

“ Might be that,” nodded Peter. “ I wasn't much in his confidence, but from what he once told me I don't think he had his own way here as a boy—and that was probably why he hoofed it.”

“ Parents strict, eh ? ”

“ His father was ! But, of course, when he returned from Australia, he had no opposition ! All he came back to was a paralysed father and an infant nephew, so he got the reins. And, by God, he kept 'em. I had a funny feeling—I remember once—oh, never mind.”

“ Mr. Coleby,” said Hogarth, “ what you were just going to tell me is probably one of the very things I particularly want to hear.”

“ Then I'll back you to hear it,” replied Peter, wryly. “ You know *your* job all right ! But—fact is—I don't like saying things about the dead. They can't answer back.”

“ Oh, yes, they can.” Peter looked startled. “ In your conscience.”

“ Ah ! ” exclaimed the young man. “ That's rather what I mean ! ”

“ But what you're going to say won't be said for the fun of it, or for the malice of it,” returned Hogarth. “ It will be a contribution towards clearing up the mystery of this dead man's death—yes, and of removing suspicion from innocent people.”

“ Well, that's true enough,” Peter admitted, “ though I think you're a bit optimistic about its value. It's just one of those queer early memories that somehow or other stick in your mind for years, after many much bigger things have

faded out. I was four or five at the time, and I'd been properly spanked and put in a corner for being naughty. My uncle did the spanking, while my grandfather watched, and while I was in the corner I blubbed myself to sleep, and began dreaming. In the dream my uncle said, 'The tables are turned now, Dad. You were the boss once—and did I know it? And did every one know it? Well, now I am, and you, sitting there, are just as helpless as Peter in the corner—and will be, till you die! He laughs best who laughs last, doesn't he, Dad?' And Granp winked his right eye, which means 'Yes.' And I saw him do it, because suddenly I found that it wasn't a dream at all—it was real—and I've never forgotten the—the horrible—satanic—look on my uncle's face—or the uncanny, confident wink of Granp—as he agreed that he laughs best who laughs last."

There was faint perspiration on Peter's forehead as he ceased speaking. Hogarth understood the reason. In his own mind was the same question. Was Granp laughing—*now*? . . . Yes, but how in the name of. . . Hogarth wrenched his mind back from the realms of impossible fantasy.

"And that's the lot, Mr. Coleby?" he said.

"It's all I can think of," answered Peter, "unless, of course, you want my complete life-story."

"That won't be necessary. Sergeant, read out your note on Mr. Coleby's actions after the black-out, will you? I'd like him to O.K. it if it's correct."

Sergeant Brown at the desk flipped back the pages of his note-book, hummed and hawed for a few moments, and then read out:

"Peter Coleby. Separated from deceased by Mrs. Dixon. Mr. Dixon on other side. After lights went out, struck match. Dropped it as Mrs. Dixon fainted against him. Match dropped on Mr. Dixon, who cried out. Hadn't another match. Hearing scuffle on other side of table, left chair, began groping way round table behind chairs of Mrs. Dixon and deceased—'course, deceased wasn't deceased just then, or in his chair, he was in the library—'tripped, fell, got up, reached his wife's chair, put hand on her shoulder, made her scream, and stayed by her during shot and till deceased returned from library with candle.' O.K., sir?"

"O.K.," replied Peter, "excepting that Mrs. Dixon didn't actually faint just then. It was a sort of half-faint."

"Would 'momentarily collapsed' better describe it, sir?"

"That's more like it."

"Momentarily collapsed," amended the sergeant. "Correction made."

"And is that all?" asked Peter, turning back to the inspector.

"Just one question more," replied Hogarth. "Who's Gerald Codrington?"

Peter shook his head.

"I've no idea," he answered. "I'd never heard of him before to-night."

"Then that's all. Will you ask your wife to step this way?"

Peter looked worried.

"Is that necessary?" he asked. "She doesn't know any more than I've told you—and—well, it would be nice if we could spare her——"

"I've got to see everybody," interrupted Hogarth. "But you can give her your opinion, if you like, that I won't bite her head off."

"Thank you, I will," smiled Peter, and escaped.

"Well, Brown," said Hogarth, as the library door closed. "We've got to go all round the table, I suppose, but I don't really think we need to look any farther than Mr. Peter Coleby—do you?"

Sergeant Brown's mouth opened, but no words came.

"Don't take that seriously," laughed Hogarth. "When I'm growing tired there's nothing that refreshes me more than to make your eyes goggle. . . . Hallo! She's been quick!"

But the newcomer was not Phyllis. It was Smith, the finger-print man.

Hogarth listened to his information—he brought more than one item—with considerable interest, and also some surprise.

"You're doing well, Smith," he said. "Thank you. Now get back to your little room and see if you can produce any more tit-bits."

Smith grinned and departed. A few seconds later Phyllis Coleby came in.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

PHYLLIS COLEBY

AS HOGARTH looked at the girl in her pretty, rather old-fashioned blue dress, he recalled a remark made by Peter Coleby : " There's nothing modern about Phyllis." She would have been more at home, he decided, in some previous age, probably the Victorian period ; and as mistress of Leak Hall she would probably cling to its historic associations rather than develop its more current potentialities. Beyond the curtained window at which the sergeant sat, the moon was shining on a topiary garden and glinting on the dark waters of a moat. Yes, perhaps Phyllis Coleby could do more to eradicate the poison that had entered the bricks of the house as well as the body of its late owner, than could Marion Lacey . . . assuming that Marion Lacey had any title to the job. . . .

" You wanted to see me ? " asked Phyllis.

" Yes," answered Hogarth, " but I won't keep you long. Please sit down."

She took the place lately occupied by her husband. Her glance began to wander round the room, but suddenly ceased its wandering and became fixed on the brick fireplace ahead of her. Above the fireplace was a large picture of an early Italian statesman, and Hogarth discovered himself noticing it with interest for the first time. He was so interested indeed that a silence lengthened to twenty seconds. Then he said :

" Your husband has told me about your engagement here, and about the trouble that ended it. It must have been very difficult for you. By the way, have you any other relatives ? "

" No, none," she answered, looking vaguely surprised at the question.

" You are an orphan—like your husband ? "

" Yes." She paused, then added, as though something more were expected of her, without knowing quite what, " That's why I had to get some work."

" Quite so. You had no particular friends who could help you ? "

" No."

" Then—when this trouble arose—was Mr. Peter Coleby the only one who knew of it ? " She nodded. " You did not confide in any one else ? "

"No! There wasn't any one else—even if I'd wanted to."

"Not even Mr. Codrington?"

Complete bewilderment spread over her face. Hogarth smiled.

"Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Coleby. That was merely my way of asking whether you knew Mr. Codrington."

"But—I don't know him!" she exclaimed, and then repeated the words of her husband. "I'd never heard of him before to-night."

"I believe you. At least, I believe you think you've never heard of him. But just think a little harder, will you? To give your memory a chance. Have you a good memory?"

"Not particularly."

"A good secretary should have."

"Have I ever said I was a good secretary?"

"Well, we'll leave that open," he smiled. "But—listen. Codrington. Gerald Codrington. 'Dear Mr. Codrington.' 'My dear Codrington.' 'Dear Gerald.' Do you remember Mr. John Coleby ever starting a letter like that?"

She screwed up her eyes, in an effort to remember. She looked attractive while she did it. Hogarth wondered whether John Coleby had ever watched that screwing up of the eyes and whether it had been one of the physical little tricks that had appealed to him.

"No! Nothing!" She smiled back. "Nothing comes at all."

"Clever, that," thought Brown at the desk. "Darn smart—even though it drew a blank!"

"Well, never mind," said Hogarth. "We'll come now to something easier to remember. I'm checking up on some of our notes, and want to be sure we've got our details right about your own actions during the period of darkness this evening. Read them out, sergeant, will you?"

"I've very little about Mrs. Coleby, sir," answered the sergeant.

"Let's have what you've got."

"Right, sir." Brown cleared his throat, and read: "'Mrs. Coleby. On deceased's left. Mr. MacPherson on other side. When lights went out did nothing till Mr. Coleby reached back of her chair and put his hand on her shoulder. Then gave a shriek.' That's all, till Mr. Coleby—the deceased—came in with the candle."

"Is it correct?" inquired Hogarth.

Phyllis hesitated.

"The sergeant has jotted down all we were told," Hogarth went on, "but perhaps we didn't get it all?"

"No—there really wasn't anything else," said Phyllis. "At least——" Her voice trailed off.

"Yes? At least——?" repeated Hogarth, watching her quietly.

"Nothing. What the sergeant read out was correct."

"I see." Hogarth's voice sounded a little disappointed.

"You just sat still, and did nothing?"

"Yes. That's it."

"Nothing whatever? Your hands, say, in your lap?"

She looked startled. "Why do you ask that?"

"Were they in your lap?"

"Yes! At least——"

"That is the second time you have said 'At least,' Mrs. Coleby," Hogarth reminded her, his voice becoming harder. "Please now let me have the end of the sentence. Would it run something like this? 'At least, not quite all the while'?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'd rather you told me that. For the moment, I'll only say that I have just received some information from my fingerprint expert—concerning Mr. Coleby's wine-glass."

Phyllis flushed, and then went pale. She locked her fingers together, and held them tight.

Hogarth waited till she composed herself. The next had to come from her.

"Do you mean—my finger-prints are on it?" she murmured. He nodded. "What a—fool!"

"Tell me what you did," said Hogarth.

"I meant—just now! Not to tell you before! Of course, now you'll never believe me!"

"There's no need to take that for granted, if what you're going to tell me is true."

"But it *is* true! And you *won't* believe it! And all because you've had to drag it out of me. I'd have told you before, only I was frightened." She stared at him, her eyes growing big with a childlike fear. "I—still am!"

"Did you poison Mr. Coleby?" asked Hogarth.

"No!" she gasped at the direct question.

"In that case, there's nothing to be frightened of," he answered. "In matters of life and death, the police aren't quite fools, you know."

She took a deep breath.

"Thank you. Well, it was like this. And please don't misunderstand anything I say about—other people. I didn't want to. There was another reason I kept this back, I expect. But now I see I've got to. Only—well—please don't mis-

understand it, and please remember the condition we were all in at the time—all over-nervous, you know—goodness, *I* was!—and feeling foolish things, and perhaps doing them!”

She stopped for a moment, breathless. Then went on:

“Do you remember, I mentioned that I’d noticed the time on Mrs. Dixon’s wrist-watch?”

“Yes, I remember,” replied Hogarth. “At four minutes to nine.”

“Yes.”

“That was four minutes before the black-out.”

“Yes. You see, I’d been watching her—being just opposite—and, well, I felt rather worried. I could see she was getting in an awful state, and—and her fingers were twitching. Once or twice I was afraid she was going to lose control of herself—as she actually did later on when she fainted—and so, when the lights failed, and we were all—at least, some of us, I expect—were thinking about Mr. Coleby’s glass, I—I—of course, it was idiotic of me—I stretched out my hand in the dark and brought it a little nearer his place. Honestly, I thought Mrs. Dixon might knock it over—I’m not really quite sure what I thought, everything was racing through one’s mind—but, anyhow, that’s what I did.” She paused, and then looked at Hogarth directly. “And that’s *all* I did!”

Hogarth smiled, and nodded.

“But you don’t say you believe me,” she gulped.

“It isn’t our custom to express belief or disbelief to those we question, Mrs. Coleby,” answered the inspector. “Will it do if I tell you that, in the particular circumstances of the moment, what you have related seems perfectly natural to me? As an impulsive action, under a great strain?”

“Oh! Thank you!” There were tears of gratitude in her eyes. “And, of course, that applies to Mrs. Dixon, too, doesn’t it? If I thought I’d said anything unfair to her, it would be too awful! May I go now? Or is there anything more? I feel a bit wobbly.”

“You can go in a moment,” replied Hogarth. “But there’s just one more thing you can do for me, if you will.”

“What is it?”

“Tell me what you saw during the short moment when your husband struck the match? Did you see Mrs. Dixon then?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“I can’t think of anything particular about her.”

“Or her hands?”

“Please!—I can’t go on like this——”

"Then it's true. Her hands *were* reaching towards Mr. Coleby's glass——"

"No! They *weren't*!" She looked at him almost angrily. "Who told you that?"

"Nobody. Where were her hands, then?"

"I don't remember! Yes, I do! They were on the table. No, gripping it. The edge. They weren't *near* the wine-glass!"

"All right. Did you notice anybody else?"

"Only Miss Lacey."

"What was she doing?"

"Going towards the library door. I think she stopped when the match was struck. Yes, I remember her turning her head. But the match soon went out again."

"And, after that, came the shot?"

"Yes."

"Have you any idea where it came from?"

"No. Only it couldn't have come from Miss Lacey, wherever it was found. I'd have seen it."

"Probably you would. Thank you. That's all, Mrs. Coleby. When you get back to the drawing-room, will you tell Mr. Dixon I would like to see him?"

When the door had closed behind her, Sergeant Brown turned in his chair.

"She did it, that's a cert," he said, solemnly.

"Now then, sergeant," retorted Hogarth, smiling admonishingly, "you can't make *my* eyes goggle!"

Brown's solemnity faded, and he grinned back.

"Just the same, sir," he remarked, "it's often them that seems the most innocent that go the deepest."

"You'll never tell me, Brown, that Mrs. Coleby is deep," replied Hogarth. "But that fellow over the mantelpiece is deeper than the miller's daughter. Know who it is?"

"I'm no good on history. Who? William the Conk?"

"Hardly. That's Niccolo Machiavelli." He walked up to the picture, gazed at it, and then lowered his eyes to the mantelpiece. About to run his finger along a small portion of it, he desisted. "Plenty of dust here, sergeant."

"Some on my desk, too," answered Brown. "I've noticed that people who are fond of their studies often keep the servants out."

"Well, we won't disturb it. Listen! Do you hear anything? That sounds to me just like the tread of a very unhappy clergyman."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE REVEREND ELDRED DIXON

IT WAS indeed a very unhappy clergyman who entered the library a moment later, but, as Hogarth quickly detected, it was one who had prepared himself for his ordeal. In fact, the Reverend Eldred Dixon had, within a short space of time, made a very creditable conquest over the tremors of the flesh, and there was an atmosphere of firm resignation about him which contrasted surprisingly with his previous demeanour at the fatal dinner-party. Whether the clergyman's new attitude was due to his realisation that there was nothing to fear, or to the fact that matters were so bad that they couldn't be worse, and so why worry, it was the inspector's job to find out.

"A shocking business, this, a shocking business," said Mr. Dixon, as he seated himself on the couch without waiting for an invitation. He had made the remark many times before, but never with so much personal detachment. He was plainly referring to a matter which, while indubitably it existed, equally indubitably had nothing whatever to do with him. "Shocking," he repeated. "Most shocking."

Hogarth had intended to confront this man immediately with a leading question, and to panic him into the truth; but suddenly he decided to change his tactics. Adopting a sympathetic pose, he replied:

"Yes, it's a terrible affair, and I'd like to have your view of it. You have been here all along—I haven't. Have you formed any opinion, sir?"

Dixon's light brown eyebrows were high in their normal position. Now they rose almost to the level of his hair. Soothed by the inspector's friendliness, he was also surprised by this flattering request for aid.

"Well, I—er—I hardly know how much I should say," he murmured.

"You can't say too much for me," replied Hogarth.

"Quite. Quite," nodded the clergyman. "But perhaps I was thinking of—er—conscience."

"I am not asking you to repeat anything that has been told you, as a minister of the Church, in confidence."

"That is true. Yes, quite. Well, then, my view—merely a personal view, you understand—and I give it to you only

because you have asked for it—my personal view would be that the next person to question, inspector, should be—h'm—Mr. Snagg."

"Mr. Snagg's attitude hardly invites one's trust," agreed Hogarth. "I take it, you are referring to just that?"

The Reverend Eldred Dixon pursed his lips.

"Or have you some other reason in your mind?"

Failing to conceal the fact that he was trying hard to find some other reason, the clergyman responded:

"Well—I should not imagine—from my knowledge of Mr. Coleby—that he would be a very considerate employer."

"And Snagg was in his employment?"

"A clerk, yes."

Hogarth already knew this. He knew more than Mr. Dixon knew about Mr. Snagg.

"Then you suggest——"

"No, no, I suggest nothing!" exclaimed Dixon, recanting. "Come, come! You are leading me on! This—er—horrible thing might have been committed by anybody. Even——" He smiled humorously. "Even myself! In your—er—official capacity, now, I feel sure you are not forgetting that?"

"No, I am not forgetting that," answered Hogarth. "What terms were you on with the deceased?"

"Eh?"

"You knew him well?"

"Oh! Yes, quite well. When I and my wife came to take up the living in this district two or three years ago, I at once called on Mr. Coleby, and—er——" He began to grow pink, and struggled unsuccessfully against the mounting colour. "Yes, we struck up a most friendly association. Most friendly."

"Did he attend your church?"

"Well, no. I am afraid Mr. Coleby was not—in my sense—a religious man."

"But that did not interfere with your friendship?"

"Dear me, why should it?"

"Did you admire his other qualities?"

"Emphatically! Most emphatically!"

"Then what makes you think he was not a considerate employer?"

Mr. Dixon evidently considered the question a difficult one. After a few moments of anxious thought, he said, "With me, he was always most friendly. We did not meet, naturally, in any business way. But—well—as you will have gathered yourself, he had rather a caustic—yes, a caustic tongue for those who were not in his good books. But, if you don't mind,

inspector, I would rather not say any more about this. You have already—with the best intentions, I am sure—urged me to say more than I intended.”

“I’m afraid we shall have to go on, Mr. Dixon,” said Hogarth. “You see, that is what I am here for—to find out things. Still, for the moment, we’ll turn to another matter. Why do you bring so much money with you to a dinner party?”

“Eh?”

“A hundred pounds seems an unnecessarily large amount.” Mr. Dixon blinked.

“There might have been cards,” he murmured, feebly.

“What! Do you play for money? Gamble?”

“Bless my soul—no, naturally not——”

“Then, if there was to have been any card-playing—which hardly seemed likely from the way matters were shaping——”

“I find all this most distressing!” interrupted the clergyman, his voice now becoming irritable. “Why do I have to explain everything I carry on me? Surely you are exceeding—that is—surely, it is not reasonable? Would I have to tell you, for example, if you asked me, where I bought my boots?”

“Do not get excited,” remonstrated Hogarth, mildly. “You did offer one explanation just now, and I think we have proved that *that* was not reasonable. So——”

“Oh, well, if you will have it,” interrupted Mr. Dixon, his irritability fading into an attitude of unconvincing sanctity. “I do not care for making all my actions public, you know.” (“I’m bloody sure of that!” thought the sergeant at the desk.) “If any of them possess any light, I prefer—h’m—to hide them under a bushel.” He sighed resignedly. “Still, so be it! H’m! Periodically I subscribe, inspector, to one of Mr. Coleby’s charities.”

“Very generously.”

“Eh? Well—it is good of you to say so. One—er—does what one can. We try to carry out our own teaching as good Christians.”

“And you had intended to hand Mr. Coleby a hundred pounds this evening?”

“That is so. Yes.”

“Which charity?”

The clergyman’s eyes went blank.

“Quick! You must know it!” cried Hogarth, sharply.

His voice had the effect, as intended, of a slap on the cheek. The clergyman’s mind, like his eyes, had gone blank, and Hogarth wanted the truth before anything else had time to enter into it. The device succeeded. Against his will, the

Reverend Eldred Dixon blurted out, "Society for the—er—Promotion of Jewish Literature," and then looked aghast at himself.

Hogarth regarded him without sympathy.

"I see. As a good Christian, you carry out your teaching by encouraging Jewish literature. That seems a little odd to me."

"I cannot help that!" retorted Mr. Dixon, now the colour of beetroot.

"Was Mr. Coleby a Jew?"

"Yes! What? No! Really, I cannot say."

"But surely——"

"I tell you, I don't know. He may have been! Or he may not. But it is an undeniable fact, to which I would be ready to swear on the Bible, if such were necessary, it is an undeniable fact that this money was intended for that charity." He threw up his hands. "You do not believe me? Very well, sir, you need not! It is clear you do not understand the workings of the human mind!"

"I do not understand the workings of your mind," confessed Hogarth, bluntly. "Was Mr. Coleby to accept this money from you at the point of the pistol?"

Mr. Dixon's mouth opened.

"Were you perhaps going to shoot him if he refused to take it?" went on Hogarth, ruthlessly.

"What—are—you talking about?" gasped the clergyman.

"I am talking about the revolver which was fired in the dining-room, and which was found later under the table——"

"But not where I was sitting——"

"No. It had taken a trip beneath the table to Miss Lacey's chair, but we didn't find Miss Lacey's finger-prints upon it. We found *yours*!"

Mr. Dixon never looked very much like a clergyman, but he had never looked less like one as he glared balefully at his accuser.

"I don't believe it—it's not true!" he muttered.

"The truth can be proved beyond the shadow of a doubt," answered Hogarth.

"How? When you've never even taken my finger-prints?"

"It wasn't necessary. Your wine-glass took them for me."

"Oh! So that's how—yes, but—but somebody else might have—I tell you, it's not true, it's not true!" He spoke wildly. "This is a trick of some sort—I don't understand anything about it! Are—are you accusing me?"

"Is it your revolver?"

"No!"

"Did you use it?"

"No!"

"You are ready to swear *that* on the Bible?"

Mr. Dixon moistened his dry lips.

"Listen!" he said, earnestly. "Listen! Mr. Coleby was poisoned. He wasn't shot. He was poisoned! On my Bible oath, I did not poison him! And if I had intended to shoot him, why would I choose a time when he was out of the room? He was here, in the library. He wasn't *in* the dining-room. So—where's the sense in it? Where's the sense, where's the sense?"

He jumped to his feet. A very frightened man attempted righteous indignation.

"I refuse to stay here any longer! To be bullied and tricked! Do what you like about it! I refuse to stay! Good-evening!"

And he walked unsteadily out of the room.

"Follow him, sergeant," said Hogarth, quietly. "See what he does, let Ash carry on for you when you can, and bring Mrs. Dixon along."

The sergeant rose with alacrity. He was glad to stretch his legs.

"But don't you want him back, sir?" he asked. "You haven't tackled him yet about that envelope I found in his overcoat pocket. You know with the crooked stamp, like the other—same envelope as the one the anonymous note was sent in——"

"Similar, not necessarily the same," corrected Hogarth. "And, by the way, with no finger-prints. No, I won't have him back for that—I'm more interested for the moment in his wife."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MRS. DIXON

MR. DIXON had only got as far as the hall when Sergeant Brown came in sight of him. Even from his back view, the clergyman appeared in a daze. Keeping well behind, but ready to dash forward at a moment's notice (the sergeant had no idea why he might be called upon to dash forward, but it seemed a good idea to be prepared to do so), Brown watched the unhappy man pause and hesitate, as though having reached the hall he wondered where to go next. A glance towards the right suggested that the cloakroom was given a thought, but Smith was in the cloakroom—his head made a vague shadow on the frosted glass of the upper part of the door—and the thought was dismissed; so, after a little more wavering, were the stairs and the front door, if the sergeant was right in guessing that these were also being considered. The sergeant's guesses were rather highly-coloured.

The end was anti-climax. Mr. Dixon returned to the drawing-room from which he had come, with the sergeant close on his heels. He made for Mrs. Dixon, sitting bolt upright on a chair and reminding Brown vaguely of a stuffed cushion; then, realising for the first time that he was being followed, the clergyman swerved away without speaking and walked to the window at the far end of the room. Having failed to contact his wife, he evidently desired to get as far away from every one else as he possibly could.

The sergeant made a sign to Constable Ash.

"Keep a special eye on Dixon," he murmured, "and see he doesn't leave the room. And take off that surprised expression—what I'm telling you don't mean anything, see?"

Ash saw, reprimanded himself, and returned his features to immobility.

Now the sergeant approached Mrs. Dixon.

"The inspector would like a word with you, ma'am," he said.

A tremor passed through the stiff body.

"When? Now?" she muttered.

"If you please, ma'am. In the library. I'll take you to him."

Pressing her thin lips together, she rose, and accompanied

the sergeant out of the room. Mr. Dixon, to avoid the approach of Rutter, turned from the window just as they were leaving. He gave a little gasp, took a step forward, then swerved in another direction.

Hogarth was standing by the table under the library window when the sergeant brought the next victim to him. He was staring down at the dust on the table's surface. It appeared to fascinate him, and the sergeant had to cough to make his presence known.

"Mrs. Dixon, sir," said Brown.

The inspector turned, and motioned her to the couch. She sank stiffly into it. The inspector walked up to her.

"I want you to tell me, please," he said, "why your husband brought a revolver with him to-night."

The incredulity in the eyes that stared back at him was too genuine to be disbelieved. Hogarth admitted this to himself with disappointment.

"Revolver! What do you mean?" exclaimed Mrs. Dixon, as though she herself had received a shot.

"You didn't know?"

"He never told—oh, no, you must be mistaken!"

"Unfortunately, there is very little doubt that the revolver used this evening was his."

He wished he could have omitted the words "very little" and substituted a positive statement, but he had decided on his policy with Mrs. Dixon, and it was to play her bowling with a straight bat.

"His? Ridiculous! It couldn't be his!" came the retort. "What—my husband bring a revolver here? I never heard such nonsense!" She added, with sudden apprehension, "Has he said it was his?"

"He denies it."

"Well, then!"

"Unfortunately your husband also denies that he has handled the revolver, and it bears his finger-prints."

"What!" gasped Mrs. Dixon.

"There is no doubt whatever about *that*."

Mrs. Dixon made no reply. Her mind was too numb to think of one. Dull terror had enveloped her, destroying the last flickers of spirit and initiative. Hogarth felt sorry for her, but he had to go on.

"When did you discover that Mr. Dixon was being blackmailed?" he asked.

Mrs. Dixon answered mechanically, "Only a few weeks ago."

"He had been blackmailed for some time?"

"Ever since we've been here."

"And that would be?"

"Nearly three years."

"How did Mr. Coleby find out your husband's secret?"

"My husband's—secret?"

"The secret he threatened to expose?"

"Oh, yes. That's what he threatened."

"Well? How did he find out?" Did she hear him? "I regret that this must be painful to you, Mrs. Dixon——"

"Painful? Oh, no. I don't feel anything. What did you ask?"

"I asked how Mr. Coleby came into possession of his knowledge," said Hogarth.

"So you did. I remember now," answered Mrs. Dixon, as though the original question had been put years ago. "It was a news-cutting. It came out of Mr. Dixon's pocket by accident when he first called upon Mr. Coleby. Came out of his letter-case or something."

"You mean, when Mr. Dixon called after taking up the living here?"

"Yes."

"With the object, I suppose, of trying to interest Mr. Coleby in his faith?"

"Yes, and against the Jewish faith." She paused, and in that pause Hogarth received a posthumous flash from one of the dead man's facets. "And also my Campaign," Mrs. Dixon added, still in the same mechanical tone. "I always ask him to mention that."

"Your husband feels strongly about the Jews?" pressed Hogarth.

"My husband? Oh, yes. Very strongly."

"And, of course, Mr. Coleby got to know of this?"

"Naturally."

"Was he—Mr. Coleby—a Jew?"

"I think there was Jewish blood in him."

"And your campaign?"

"A Purity League." Now her voice became hard. "I have always run a Purity League. I believe in Goodness. That was why I married into the Church. I thought my influence and my money might be useful." All at once she ceased to be a word-machine and became a human being again. "I have my position to keep up!" she cried. "My social position! I am respected—I always have been! Respected! I always have been!"

Then her eyes grew flat again.

"And this secret—this knowledge acquired by Mr. Coleby

through a news-cutting," said Hogarth quietly, "was a direct menace to your position?"

"Yes."

"Publicity, in fact, would have made your position impossible?"

"Yes. And his."

"Your husband's?"

"Mr. Dixon's."

"Is there a difference?"

"What?"

"I said 'your husband.' You said, 'Mr. Dixon.'"

She was silent.

"You may as well tell me," said Hogarth. "I am already guessing what was in that news-cutting."

"You would—you're a detective," she murmured.

"Then will you confirm my guess? In case it is wrong?"

"What is your guess?"

"I prefer it to come from you," he replied. "You see, in that case it would be something in the nature of a confidence which I should not break unless the law absolutely demanded it—which the law may not. On the other hand, if I found out all by myself, I should be perfectly free, and would be breaking no confidence if I passed my discovery on."

She looked at him fixedly.

"Is that kind, or just clever?" she asked, with the first tiny ray of hope in her weary eyes.

"You must work that out for yourself," answered Hogarth, but policemen don't take any special pleasure in making people uncomfortable. Sergeant, trot down to the kitchen, will you, and see whether Constable Roper has anything to report."

"Very good, sir," replied Brown, and left the library silently swearing.

"Thank you," said Mrs. Dixon, when the door had closed.

"Yes, I think you must be kind, as well as clever. Did you guess that I am not Mrs. Dixon?"

"If you are not, I am letting you tell me."

"Well—I am not. But Mr. Dixon did not know he was committing bigamy. He believed his first wife was dead. She deserted him and went to America, and there was a report that she had been drowned in the Niagara Falls."

"An unconfirmed report?"

"Unfortunately. The news-cutting was from an American paper. It said that Mrs. Eldred Dixon, believed to have been drowned, had turned up again safe and sound, and was running a saloon somewhere or other."

Hogarth nodded. "And you, of course, believed she was dead, just as Mr. Dixon did?"

"Me? I didn't know anything about it!" she exclaimed; then sat upon her momentary indignation, and relapsed into her quiet mood. "I did not know even that he had been previously married."

"I see. And when did *you* first learn of it?"

"A few weeks ago."

"Mr. Dixon told you then?"

"No. Mr. Coleby told me. It was his first—application of the screw. I think that is the expression. In a letter I had from him, he gave me the particulars, and said he now had to bring me into it."

"You have the letter?"

"I should think not! I burned it."

"Did Mr. Coleby explain why he now had to bring you into it?"

"It didn't need explaining. I had the money. And Mr. Dixon was beginning to rebel." She paused, frowning. "Most unpleasant, all this, is it not? I thought the cheques he asked for—my husband—that is, Mr. Dixon—went to Charities. It was when I began to refuse his requests for them that Mr. Coleby wrote to me. Well, they did go to a Charity, though not one I knew anything about. A Charity of Mr. Coleby's choosing!"

"And what did you do, when you received Mr. Coleby's letter?" asked Hogarth. "Besides tearing it up?"

"I decided to go on giving Mr. Dixon the money," she returned. "It was better than a scandal. I couldn't bear a scandal. Perhaps you can understand that—with my Campaign." She stiffened slightly. "But I may mention—in case it has any interest to you—that this was purely a marriage of convenience. Nothing else. Just convenience. There was never any idea of any family. If—if there had been——"

She did not finish the sentence, aghast at the idea. After giving her a few moments to recover, Hogarth asked:

"May I know, in view of the unpleasant situation that existed between you and Mr. Coleby, why you and Mr. Dixon accepted to-night's invitation?"

"You might as well ask, inspector, why he asked us to come," retorted Mrs. Dixon.

"But I already know that—assuming that the information I have received from you all is correct and that Mr. Coleby was not concealing any other motive. His life had been threatened by some anonymous person, and he wanted to find out who that person was."

"Yes, that is true. We certainly would not have come if we had known that!"

"So why did you?"

"Because we were in his power. It wasn't an invitation, it was an order."

"Did the order include a further instalment to be paid to Mr. Coleby this evening?"

"Mr. Dixon was told to have it on him. So he brought it. But listen!" she added desperately. "Mr. Coleby was poisoned! You know that! Not shot—*poisoned*!"

"Oh, yes," agreed Hogarth. "All the same, I have to consider the possibility that he *might* have been shot——"

"Do you arrest people for what might have been?" she exclaimed.

"There is such a thing as intention to kill, and where it exists, one method might be discarded for another."

She stared.

"I'm trying to follow you. Is this what you mean? That Mr. Dixon came here with the intention of shooting Mr. Coleby, but I saved him the trouble by poisoning him instead?"

Hogarth shook his head.

"You were sitting next to Mr. Coleby," he answered, "but let us disprove that theory." He smiled at her, to sooth her growing emotion. "We can probably do it if you will repeat to me what you did during the period of darkness after the lights went out."

"I didn't do anything," said Mrs. Dixon. "I was too frightened. My mind went black, as well as the room. It was terrifying! When Mr. Coleby—Mr. Peter Coleby—struck the match—let me think——"

"Yes, that is the time I am most curious about, Mrs. Dixon. Try and remember."

"I am trying. Everything was dizzy. Even the striking of the match made me jump. A nightmare. I believe I fell against Mr. Coleby—Peter Coleby—and made him drop the match. After that I don't remember much, not till the library door opened and Mr. John Coleby came back with the candle."

"Did you hear the shot?"

"I don't think so, but I couldn't tell you even that for certain. It was all muddled. My ears were throbbing. Anything I heard may have been just that."

"Well, then," said Hogarth, "just before you fainted, or collapsed——"

"I don't know that I fainted. Everything was out of proportion—grotesque—*not happening*——"

"Yes, I understand. Just before the match went out, did you see anything—notice anything—in the matchlight?"

She stared ahead of her. Cynically, the picture of Niccolo Machiavelli stared back.

"No, nothing," she replied.

"You are quite sure?"

"Quite sure I've nothing to tell you."

"But if you had, might it be anything about Mrs. Peter Coleby, who was on the other side of your host?"

Mrs. Dixon looked startled, then frowned.

"Why try to make me tell you things if you already know them?" she demanded.

"I know that Mrs. Coleby touched the wine-glass," answered Hogarth, "but I thought you might add to my knowledge—as I can, perhaps, to yours. Mrs. Coleby actually moved the glass."

"Why—did she do that?"

"You've no opinion?"

Mrs. Dixon looked at the inspector earnestly.

"Listen, Mr. Hogarth—that is your name, is it not?" she said. "I did see her hand move towards the glass. I wasn't going to mention it because I'm not a policeman and I didn't want to get her into trouble. I don't know her, she seems a silly little thing, but I can't believe she did it. Still, now you know what you know, you didn't hear it from me, and nothing I say or don't say can alter it. But I didn't touch the glass, and I don't know anything about the revolver, and——"

She was interrupted by a sharp knock on the door, and Sergeant Brown came in, his face important with news.

"There's some trouble in the grounds, sir," he reported.

"Will you come?"

A flurry of feet in the hall accompanied the announcement. The sergeant swung round and bolted back.

"Please return to the drawing-room at once, Mrs. Dixon," said Hogarth sharply, and ran after the sergeant.

CHAPTER TWENTY

GRIM INTERLUDE

TO MOST of the guests, whose nerves were already strained to snapping point, it had seemed that one single night could not hold any further horrors. From the moment they had entered the fatal dining-room, with its incredible symbols of death and its sickly scent of lilies, there had been no respite, for even the periods between the successive events—the disturbing speech of John Coleby, the failure of the lights, the death of John Coleby, the advent of the police, the macabre repetition of the prelude to the tragedy, and the finding of Codrington's body in the moat—even the interludes had been punctuated with jarring little incidents, grating conversation, or neurotic silences. And weighing them down, while the police were at work, was a deadly sensation of impotence.

So that when James Rutter, seated by the back window of the drawing-room, peered through the curtains into the patchwork of black and silver and suddenly cried, "Somebody out there—quick—after him!" he started a stampede.

Constable Ash was by the door at the other end of the room. As he began a dash to the window, Rutter came away excitedly and shouted, "No—get him! I think he had a knife! Come on, Boyd—we'll catch him and settle this damn' business!" The constable hesitated, but seeing Rutter and Leonard racing to the door, he turned and led them, making through the hall for the basement stairs. Others joined the tide. They behaved rather like school children suddenly released from control. "Come on!" bellowed Peter. "We go, we go, see how we go, swift as an arrow from a Tartar's bow!" chortled Forsyth. MacPherson and Dixon followed them, the latter after spinning round like an expiring top. When Mrs. Dixon returned to the drawing-room, she found only two other people in it—Phyllis Coleby and Ted Snagg.

Mr. Dixon formed the rear of the procession. He was tottering past the dining-room door, trying to feel like a holy Crusader instead of just a bewildered mortal wondering what he was at, as Inspector Hogarth reached the hall.

"What's all this?" cried Hogarth.

"Someone outside—we're catching him!" gasped Mr. Dixon, idiotically.

"Well, you go back!" ordered Hogarth. "We don't want this place turned into a lunatic asylum!"

With infinite relief, the clergyman obeyed.

The lovely gardens, with their long box hedges, queer clipped shapes, winding paths and sleeping birds, awakened with strange activity. Forms darted here and there, without any concerted plan, dashed after phantoms, tripped over shadows, slithered through mysterious clumps of foliage. Peter ran into a constable, who promptly seized him. The butler ran round a great oak tree, apparently chasing himself. Hogarth, when he reached the garden through the breakfast-room, found MacPherson standing by the moat, and decided that a word or two with this solid person would not be waste of time.

"What's happened, in twelve words?" he barked. "Make it a telegram!"

"Rutter saw a man from the drawing-room window—we're looking for him," answered the Scotsman, complying with unconscious exactitude to the inspector's request.

A figure ran by then. It was Leonard. "Someone in that clump over there!" he called, and vanished.

They followed him into a region of deep shadow. The spreading branches of big trees blotted out the night sky and the moon. MacPherson tripped once, and Hogarth had to help him up. Resuming their way with a little more caution, they came presently to a small clearing. Here MacPherson nearly tripped again. Last time it had been over the root of a tree. This time it was over Leonard Boyd.

"Good God!" gasped MacPherson. "What's this?"

Hogarth stooped over the body. Leonard was unconscious, and there was a bruise on the back of his head. Hogarth examined it quickly.

"He's no'——" began MacPherson.

Hogarth shook his head.

"Just a pretty bad knock," he answered.

Rutter came panting up. His eyes goggled, and he stared at the prostrate form. Then he shouted, "Ah!" and dashed on through the bushes. A moment later a constable appeared.

"Lummy! Number Three?" gasped the man.

"Shut up!" snapped Hogarth, and turned to MacPherson. "I don't like this! Too many amateurs! Who told you all to come chasing out here?" MacPherson thought the complaint unreasonable, but he said nothing. "Listen, Mr. MacPherson! I want you all back to the house. If there are any objections these can be made to me—I am taking full responsibility for my actions. Follow Mr. Rutter, please,

round up all the other guests who are out, and see they all go back to the drawing-room. This search can be left to my own men. When you've done that, report to me—that is, let me know—in the library. Is all that quite clear ? ”

MacPherson gave Hogarth a shrewd look, then nodded.

“ Ay, and thank you for the correction,” he answered. “ I'm thinking I'll be happier letting you know, inspector, than reporting to you ! ”

As he disappeared, Hogarth turned to the constable.

“ Fetch the doctor at once,” he said, “ and return with him here. Stand by for anything he may want.”

“ Very good, sir,” replied the constable, and hastened away.

Dr. Dawson arrived in less than two minutes, his panting breath issuing from his lips in indignant puffs. The constable's lurid account had set him off at such a pace that it was all the constable could do to keep up with him. They found the inspector administering first-aid.

“ H'm ! Doing my stuff ! ” grunted the doctor.

“ Just the start of it,” answered Hogarth. “ Not more than you'll mind, or he needs. Just corroborate my belief that he's not going to die, and I'll be off.”

“ Oh ! You'll be off ! Just like that ! ” growled the doctor, already on his knees. “ Don't tell me anything—that would be a pity ! ” He stared at his third case that evening. “ Without any doubt, he's going to die.”

“ What ! ”

“ So are we all. But not just yet.” Dr. Dawson grinned maliciously at the inspector's frown. “ A touch of humour is necessary sometimes, Hogarth, in our profession, otherwise we should have to build more lunatic asylums. What happened ? How did he get like this ? ”

“ Aren't you going to tell me that ? ” countered Hogarth.

“ Oh, certainly. The patient is in a state of stupor, which may last for a short time or deepen into coma, due to a disturbance of the functions of the brain caused by the impact of some as yet undetermined object with the cranium. In other words, he has had a bash on the back of the head. Got that ? ”

“ For what it's worth,” smiled Hogarth.

“ And what do I get in exchange ? ”

“ Something almost equally valueless. He directed us to this spot, preceded us by a couple of minutes, and we found him like this. Then I sent for you.”

“ Who's ' we ' ? ” inquired the doctor.

“ MacPherson was with me.”

"Oh, the Scotsman. I like that fellow. I'll bet he's good at bridge. Just the two of you? Nobody else about?"

"Are you taking on my job?" asked Hogarth.

"You've taken on a bit of mine!" retorted the doctor.

"He was here alone. A few moments after we arrived, Rutter and the constable came along."

"I see. No, there's something I don't! What were they all out here for, anyway?"

"We were chasing a man who'd been seen in the grounds," Hogarth told him.

"Really!" exclaimed the doctor. "What sort of a man?"

"The usual sort, I expect. Two arms and a couple of legs."

"Thank you! For a police description, that's unusually explicit!"

"It's all you'll get at the moment from me. I didn't see him myself, and so far I've had no other description."

"Who did see him?"

Hogarth considered for a few seconds before answering. His eyes roamed towards the bushes through which the chase had been continued.

"Don't tell me," said Dawson. "I'm only the doctor."

"No reason why I shouldn't tell you," replied Hogarth.

"It was James Rutter, from the drawing-room window."

"Oh, Rutter," grunted the doctor. "Coleby's business rival. I'll bet *he* knows how to play bridge, too—with five aces in the pack!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THE MACPHERSONS

THE INSPECTOR and the sergeant had returned to the library when David MacPherson knocked on the door. He entered in response to the inspector's "Come in!"

"I'm here to report to you," he said, rather dryly.

"And what's the report?" asked Hogarth. "Are they all back?"

"All but Rutter," answered MacPherson.

"Why not Rutter? Couldn't you find him?"

"Ay, I found him, but—as you may have discovered yoursel', inspector, Mr. Rutter has no obliging nature. 'It was me saw that man,' he said, 'and so it's up to me to be out here to identify him when he's found—that is, if I don't find him myself.' Those were his worrds, and he added that he

wasna' taking any orders from me.' So, all the others having been rounded up, I gave the position to a constable, the one who looks like a walrus, thinking maybe 'twas time I rounded up myself."

"Did you tell the constable about Rutter?"

"I did. That was what I meant when I said I gave him the position. 'Oh, he won't go in, won't he?' said the constable. 'Just let me have a little word with him!'"

"Then for the moment we'll leave it at that," said Hogarth.

"What's your opinion of this, Mr. MacPherson?"

"Which?" asked MacPherson. "I'm beginning to lose count?"

"The latest mystery. The man in the grounds."

"I've nae opinion about that."

"Well, then—Codrington?"

"I ken nothing about Codrington."

"Nothing at all?"

"Only that he was found dead in the moat."

"Do you think the man in the grounds was responsible for that?"

"As I ken nothing about the man in the grounds and as I ken nothing about Codrington, will you tell me how I can ken whether there was anything between them?" inquired MacPherson.

Hogarth smiled. "Very well then, let us get back to the starting point. Sergeant, read out your note on Mr. MacPherson's movements during the black-out, so he can let us know whether we have them right."

Sergeant Brown, already prepared to find the page in his notebook, swept the pages back, and read:

"'MacPherson. Did nothing till after match went out. Then joined in scuffle behind chairs on his side of the table, finding opponent to be Boyd when, after shot was fired, Coleby returned from library with candle.' Correct, sir?"

"Ay," agreed MacPherson.

"Correct, as far as it goes," said Hogarth, "but can you add anything to it?"

"No."

"What did you do when Mr. Coleby returned?"

"Haven't ye got all that? We sorted ourselves out, and those of us who had got up sat down again."

"These being?"

"Myself, Boyd, Forsyth——"

"Forsyth?"

MacPherson pondered, then shook his head. "I was wrong there. Forsyth was seated, but for the moment I thought he

hadn't been. Then, Peter Coleby—Miss Lacey—and Mr. Snagg under the table."

"That agrees with our list," said the sergeant.

"Yes, but why did you think Forsyth hadn't been seated?" pressed the inspector.

MacPherson looked a little perplexed by the question.

"I dinna ken. I just thought it, for the moment."

"There's a reason for everything, often a subconscious one. Might you have thought it because Mr. Forsyth *had* been out of his chair, and had only just sat down again?"

"It's possible—it's possible," admitted MacPherson. "But it would be no more than a theory."

"Was his chair in position?"

"I wouldna' swear to it."

"How was he sitting? Do you remember? Was he right on his chair?"

"Ay. I mind that. He was firm on his chair—and staring ahead of him."

"Making it appear, very obviously, that he had never moved? That he was glued to his seat?"

"It might be—since you put it so."

"It might very likely be. Now, you yourself were only one place removed from Mr. Coleby."

"Ay."

"Could you reach his glass from where you sat?"

MacPherson frowned. "Ye ken weel I couldna do that! Ay, and ye ken weel I didna' kill John Coleby. Mebbe, inspector, you are wasting time?"

"But you hated Coleby."

"Oh, did I?"

"You can correct me if I am wrong."

"I despised the man."

"And do not mean to weep at his funeral. You might save time yourself, Mr. MacPherson, by explaining the absence of your tears? You came here to dine with a man you despised—bringing your daughter with you—and that man is now dead. I should be a very poor detective if that did not interest me."

David MacPherson pondered solemnly for a few moments, then shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Ah, weel, if ye must have it," he said. "We're not made of money, and when we came to Leverage at the beginning of the year Jenny thought she'd be taking a job. Coleby was advertising in the local paper for a new secretary——"

"Having just lost one," interposed Hogarth, nodding. "Go on. But I believe I could finish your story."

"Then why not save me the trouble?" suggested MacPherson, with obvious surprise.

"It will be better coming from you than from me," replied Hogarth. "Miss MacPherson answered the advertisement?"

"Ay. Unknown to me. And was engaged for a month's trial. She left after three days. I turned up on the fourth with a horsewhip."

"Yes, and then?" asked Hogarth, as the Scotsman paused.

"I'll not be describing the interview in detail," responded MacPherson, "but neither Mr. Coleby nor myself had what you may call forgiving natures, and Mr. Coleby swore he'd get back at me. When I asked him how, he said I'd learn later." Then MacPherson smiled. "I am still waiting!"

"And I am still waiting," answered Hogarth, regarding MacPherson curiously, "to know why, in these circumstances, you came to this dinner?"

"It was the worrding of the invitation," explained MacPherson. "I havena got it on me, or you'd have found it when you searched me, but I can tell you the sort of thing it was. It was more of a challenge than an invitation. He recalled our last interview, and he said both I and my daughter might think it a pity if we were not present to hear some of the things he proposed to talk about to-night—it would be better to hear them first-hand. Ay, that was how he put it. I admit, Mr. Hogarth, I'd been a wee bit troubled about slander. And MacPhersons have never been backward to face their accusers, ay, and to accuse back if need be. We discussed it, Jenny and I. And, rightly or wrongly, we decided to come. Mebbe there was a grain of curiosity in us. We weren't scared. I've never known Jenny scared since the cradle. . . . But Mr. Coleby died, I'm thinking, before he talked of Jenny. Ay, maybe there'd have been more talk later, if somebody hadna stopped his mouth." All at once MacPherson looked at Hogarth squarely. "No, Jenny's no scared. She'd stand up to any Goliath. But she's having a difficult evening, I'm knowing that, and if she isna upstairs at this moment helping Miss Lacey, as like as not she'll be lending a hand with Mr. Boyd—not for the first time to-night—and so I'm asking you if what I've just told you will do for the two of us? If you're the judge of character I take you to be, you'll mebbe consider whether I'm a clever murderer bluffing you, but you'll never be sic a fule as to wonder that of Jenny!"

Hogarth walked to the door and opened it.

"Will you send Mr. Rutter to me next—or, if he hasn't

returned yet, Mr. Snagg ? ” he said. “ No, Mr. MacPherson, I don’t think I’m sic a fule as all that, and I won’t worry your daughter unless I find later on that I have to.”

MacPherson thanked him, and left the room. Hogarth walked to the table by the window on the right—the south—wall. The sergeant, turning his head from his desk under the other window, watched his chief over his shoulder, waiting for a comment. Receiving none, he asked at last :

“ Well, sir ? ”

“ You know, what I’m wondering, Brown,” answered Hogarth, “ is what was on this table not so long ago ? Something that isn’t there now.”

Brown left the desk, and walked to the table.

“ Careful how you breathe,” warned Hogarth. “ We don’t want to disturb this frame of dust.”

Placing a large hand before his mouth, as though to avoid the temptation of licking the dust up, Sergeant Brown lowered his head and scrutinised the frame. The clear surface inside the frame formed a square of about fifteen inches.

“ Book ? ” he queried.

“ Not a usual shape for a book,” replied Hogarth.

A timid knock on the door brought their heads up.

“ Rutter wouldn’t knock like that,” murmured Hogarth, and called, “ Come in, Snagg ! ”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

SNAGG

ALL THE EVENING Ted Snagg had been the most pitiable object of a pitiable assembly, but he had never looked more pitiable than now. As he stood visibly trembling in the library doorway, his unhealthy pallor was accentuated into a sort of glistening whiteness by the redness of his untidy hair. Birth, heredity, environment, circumstances, all seemed to have collaborated in a determination to thwart the development in this man of any virtue, and for a moment Hogarth wondered whether any conceivable process existed by which such a man as Snagg could achieve grace. But Hogarth’s job was not Ethics. It was not even, in his private opinion, Justice. For was there any justice in the varying conditions under which human beings were born ? It was to catch criminals with the object of reducing crime. And if Ted Snagg had committed a crime, well, then he must be caught.

"How about coming clean, Snagg?" said Hogarth, not unkindly. "Close the door."

Snagg closed the door, then moistened his lips.

"A nice chance I have!" he muttered. "But I've never done anything!"

"Never, Snagg?"

"There you go at once! That's what I meant. Holding the past against me, so that whenever anything else happens——"

"Don't get excited," interrupted Hogarth, as the man's voice began to rise. "I'm not holding the past against you. That's finished and done with, as far as I'm concerned——"

"Is it!" snapped Snagg, with sudden venom. "Oh, yes! Come clean! Do you folks ever think a man can come clean once he's been in quod?"

"It's been known, Snagg."

"Well, *I've* never known it! All I know is—one slip and you're finished! On the scrap-heap! Got to do what you're damn' well told—by the police, by your employers—by the whole shoot!"

"But one always has to do what one's employers tell one to do," said Hogarth, playing his man. "I'm in the same boat there."

"Oh! Are you!" Snagg's voice became bitterly jeering as he rose through transparent waters to the surface. "Have *you* ever had it held over you that if you don't do what you're told you won't be just sacked, but shoved back in——"

He stopped suddenly. Now there was a tinge of unhappy colour on each pale cheek.

"Which of your employers held that over you?" inquired Hogarth. "Coleby or Rutter?"

Snagg blinked. "You know they've both employed me?" he muttered.

"Of course I do," replied Hogarth. "You were with Rutter first. And then—after the lapse of a certain period, when there was no chance that Rutter would employ you again—you were with Coleby. So, naturally, it must have been Coleby who held the past over you—eh?" Snagg was silent. "What made him take you on? Generosity?"

"By God, no!" exclaimed Snagg.

"What, then?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"Coleby can't hurt you now. By the way, did you poison him, when you thought he might?"

"Here, stop that!" gasped Snagg. "I don't want any of that!"

"But you knew it had to come."

"Course I knew it had to come! I seen it coming all the bl—all the evening! And I suppose I fired that shot, too? Didn't I?"

"Did you?"

"And chucked that bloke Codrington or whatever his name is into the moat?"

"Did you?"

"And then, while I was still in the drawing-room, cracked another man on the head out in the grounds! And if the butler's found hanging in an attic by his feet, I'll have popped up and done that!" He had remained standing by the door all this while, but now he darted forward, and grabbed hold of the inspector's sleeve. Two beady little eyes stared up into Hogarth's. "Listen, mister! I'm not saying I've never written a name what wasn't mine! I'm not saying I mightn't do it again. There, that's clean! But I'm not a killer! I couldn't stick a knife into a man—or poison him, or shove him in a moat! I couldn't do it, I tell you—I couldn't do it, I couldn't do it!"

"The way to make me believe you are speaking the truth, Snagg," replied Hogarth, "is to go on telling it. I know all about the trouble between you and Rutter—we won't go into that—you've paid the price—but I want to know some more about the trouble between you and Coleby. What was he holding over you? And why?"

Snagg thought hard. With his mind still undecided, he asked:

"I expect you know, don't you, that the original firm was Coleby and Rutter? They were partners. You know that, don't you?"

"Well, you're telling me. Were you with the firm then?"

"No. I didn't join till it was just Rutter. He'd bought Coleby out—yes, and it was when he took me on as clerk that he was finding he'd bought a pup! *And* paid the price of a full-grown dog. Coleby did him, all right! Did him fair and square. But it was all legal, and Rutter couldn't get at him."

"Did he try?"

"Oh, did he! But it was no use. Why, even when Coleby started up again on his own—in the same town, in the same line—Rutter found he couldn't do anything. There was a legal action, but he lost it. Coleby had worked it all out from the word Go, and had the whole thing taped. Rutter's no good at documents."

"Do you mean," asked Hogarth, "that when Coleby sold

Rutter his share of the original firm, he meant to set up alone as his old partner's rival ? ”

“ That was it ! And when it came to hard business, he had Rutter cold ! Rutter went down, while Coleby went up. He was still going down when I—er—left him.”

“ And when you came out—that is, back—Coleby took you on ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ At once ? ”

Snagg looked at the inspector suspiciously.

“ What makes you ask that ? ” he demanded.

“ Well—I just wondered.”

“ You *would* ! No—not at once.”

“ I expect you had a pretty tough time to keep going in the interim ? Before Coleby gave you this new job ? ”

“ I expect I did.”

“ But you managed—somehow ? ”

“ Somehow.”

“ And Coleby found out how ? ”

“ P'r'aps ! ” snapped Snagg. “ But is there any need for me to tell you ? ”

“ I won't force you to. As a matter of fact, it may relieve you to know that—at this particular stage—I can't. You see, I can be clean, Snagg, too.” He smiled. “ Well, go on. I'll give you a lead. Coleby used this knowledge——”

“ By God, he did ! See, I'd been with Rutter. If Coleby wanted any information, I had to give it. Sometimes, even to get it. I'm not going into that ! What's the use ? It was hell, all right—Coleby enjoyed making people suffer—he'd go to any lengths—and he made me suffer all right, with his domineering and his sarcasm, blast him ! There you are ! Blast him ! I wouldn't say that to you if it was me who'd stopped his heart ! Would I ? Well, would I ? But he made Rutter suffer, too. I expect they'd quarrelled when they were partners, but I don't know anything about that. Anyhow, Coleby ruined him, till now Rutter wants to sell out, and nobody will buy. Not with Coleby against him. Not a chance with Coleby alive ! I tell you, Rutter——”

Suddenly he stopped, as though aghast at himself. He lowered his weak eyes, and stared at the carpet stupidly.

“ Yes ? Rutter—— ? ” queried Hogarth.

Snagg made no reply.

“ Come along ! Let's have it ! ” urged Hogarth.

But Snagg remained silent. The stream of his words had suddenly met a rock. Hogarth shrugged his shoulders.

“ Very well, Snagg, we'll leave that for the moment,” he

said, "but there's something else you've got to tell me about. That lie about your alleged furniture design isn't helping you. How about clearing that up?"

"Clearing what up?" mumbled Snagg.

"No need to be dense. I know very well what that design is—it's a plan of the grounds at the back of this house. What did you make it out for?"

"I didn't make it out," denied Snagg, and realised his mistake too late.

"Well, that tells me something," remarked Hogarth, dryly, "because, you know, you implied it was your own work when you were pretending it was a design for some piece of furniture. You must have been very worried, Snagg—to put it mildly—to try and fool a detective with an idiotic story like that. If you didn't make it out, who did?"

Snagg fell silent again.

"And why was one spot marked with a cross? You know, of course, that this was the spot where we found Codrington's body?" The silence continued. Hogarth went on, sternly, "You haven't been charged yet with the murder of Coleby. Would you like to be charged with the murder of Codrington?"

The suggestion woke Snagg up.

"You can't plant that on me!" he cried. "I've never seen Codrington! I've never heard of Codrington! You can't plant that on me!"

"Who gave you this plan?"

"I've told you all I know!"

"But you know who gave it to you?"

"No one gave it to me."

"Then how did you get it?"

"I don't know!"

"What! Don't know? A plan of the grounds is found in your pocket, and you don't know how it got there?"

"That's it."

"Then why did you pretend that you did know when I found it?"

"Who did?"

"You told me it was a design for——"

"I know I did."

"And I'm asking, why?"

"Because you'd scare anybody into saying anything! That's why! You scared me!"

"I see. You're easily scared, aren't you, Snagg?"

"That's a fact! That's why I got under the table when the shot was fired. You can't help it if you're scared."

"Your own finger-prints were on the revolver."

"What—were they?"

"How was that?"

"It—it was under the table, too. I picked it up—but dropped it quick!"

"Did you have any reason to think the shot was fired at you?"

"Me? No!"

"Quite sure of that?"

"Course! Why should they? But another shot—you know, in the dark—might have got me!"

"True, Snagg. It might have. And somebody *did* try to drug you, didn't they? Afterwards?"

"What?"

"With a doped cigarette. But you didn't smoke much of it, and I found the rest of it on the stairs after you went back to the drawing-room. Who gave you that cigarette?"

Snagg began to crack. "I don't know what you're talking about," he whimpered. "I've nothing more to tell you—I don't know what you're talking about."

Hogarth looked at Snagg very hard, and then turned to the sergeant.

"Take him back to the drawing-room, will you, sergeant," he said. "We'll have Mr. Rutter next."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

FORSYTH

BUT it was not James Rutter who next appeared in the library after Snagg had tottered out of it. It was Rodney Forsyth, who appeared unsummoned with a cynical smile on his face. Hogarth frowned at him.

"I sent for Mr. Rutter," he said, shortly.

"Mr. Rutter seems to have taken a little walk," replied the actor. "Since he is not here to answer his cue, I appear as his understudy."

Hogarth considered for a moment, then decided to humour him.

"Very good of you," he answered, without meaning it in the least. "But from the start, Mr. Forsyth, you have made a point of being helpful. I wish I could say the same of some of the others." The praise went home, and Hogarth noted Forsyth's pleased expression before he turned to Sergeant

Brown. "Find Rutter, sergeant. I can't have him running loose like this. And when you've found him, bring him direct to me."

"Very good, sir," replied Brown.

Brown felt a little disappointed as he left the room. He was sorry to miss the interview with Forsyth. Still, chasing Rutter might provide a bit of fun, and even a policeman cannot have it all his own way. When the door had closed, Forsyth said :

"Interesting character, Rutter. If I were doing a Galsworthy season, I should have him in the company."

"Yes? For what part?" asked Hogarth.

"Oh, several parts—he is a Galsworthian type. Snagg, too. I should cast him for convicts."

Hogarth nodded and led him on, affecting a friendliness he was far from feeling.

"All this must be absorbing to you, Mr. Forsyth, as a student of psychology. You have to study psychology in your art?"

"Indeed!"

"And I expect you have been busy studying it to-night. Now, in our present drama, who would you cast for the villain?"

Forsyth looked at the inspector with a tinge of suspicion. Hogarth smiled back disarmingly, and suggested that in this case *he* would probably not claim the principal role.

"I am a student of psychology, as you imply, Mr. Hogarth," replied Forsyth, rather stiffly, "and also of the interpretation of dialogue. You are asking me whether I poisoned the late Mr. Coleby. I did not—have that pleasure."

"It would have been a pleasure, then?" Forsyth shrugged.

"Well, who, in your opinion, did have it?"

"In my opinion? There is little doubt."

"Your opinion being——?"

Forsyth regarded the detective with irritating tolerance.

"You attach importance to my opinion?"

"I am interested in all opinions," said Forsyth. "Perhaps yours particularly."

Forsyth accepted the compliment, but refused, to Hogarth's disappointment, to be drawn by it. He appeared to ponder, then shook his head.

"No, sir! It is your opinion, not mine, that holds the interest, since it is doubtless based upon more solid clues—as, for example, those gained when you were searching us—yes, upon more solid clues than I myself could provide. I have said that I myself have little doubt, and my casting of the rôle of villain—to quote your phrase—might fall on somebody who

was not—h'm—very far from me at the table. But perhaps even that is saying too much. I refuse to influence you. I will not talk about other people."

"Then let us talk about yourself," said Hogarth. "Assuming the absurdity that you had poisoned Mr. Coleby, and that you had had the opportunity to do so—by the way, what were your own actions during the period when the lights were out?"

The question, asked casually, seemed to startle Forsyth.

"My—actions?" he repeated.

"Yes. What did you do? I'm checking up on all these details, just as a matter of routine."

"Ah, quite so." If Forsyth had been ruffled, his voice was now composed. "I did nothing."

"Nothing at all?"

"There is no distinction between the two conditions."

"You did not leave your chair, then?"

Forsyth's eyes blazed with excess of indignation, as though to have left his chair would have been an unpardonable crime.

"Has anybody been lying to you that I did?" he demanded.

"It seemed to me," answered Hogarth, refusing to satisfy the actor's obvious curiosity on the point, "that, during the rather mysterious scuffle going on behind your chair, you might have moved."

"I did not move," asserted Forsyth, vehemently, "and anybody who tells you that I——"

"Don't get excited," interposed Hogarth. "I have to go into all these points. You did not rise?"

"I have said so."

"Why not?"

"What?"

"Why, when you heard the trouble behind your chair, did you not do what ninety-nine people out of a hundred would have done? We have had one notable exception—Snagg, who got under the table. I can hardly class you with Snagg, and of course you did not get under the table. But why did you sit still and do nothing?"

Forsyth glared, and his colour began to augment.

"I do not think I care very much for your tone!" he retorted.

"And why would it have given you any pleasure to poison Mr. Coleby?" continued Hogarth.

"Pleasure? What is all this——"

"It was your own term. And how did Mr. Coleby cause that scar on your face?"

Forsyth clenched his hands till his knuckles showed white. His composure was fast leaving him, as Hogarth intended that

it should, and he ceased to act. "The real man now!" thought Hogarth. "He's the one I want!"

"You—know that?" Forsyth gasped.

"It's true, isn't it?"

"How did you know?"

"I didn't know," admitted Hogarth. "It was a guess, and apparently a good one. I now understand your animosity—quite natural animosity—I expect I should feel the same myself. That scar—and the shock to your health—must have ruined your career——"

"By God, it did!"

"You have my sympathy. Not, I suppose, that Mr. Coleby did it deliberately——"

"Deliberately?" cried Forsyth, beside himself. His pupils dilated, and he leapt from his chair. Hogarth watched his eyes, watched the unbalanced mind behind them. "Yes! Deliberately! Deliberately, while I was trying to pass him. And why should I not pass him? But oh, no! Oh, no! Pass Mr. Coleby? The road was his—it belonged to him—nobody must have the effrontery to pass Mr. John Coleby! Forty—fifty—sixty—seventy—a damned little business man, who knew nothing of greatness, and who had never—but I was beating him, putting him in his place, and I remember his sick expression as I drew level and then began to pass! Yes, I was passing! But he pulled into the middle—the damned skunk pulled into the middle—and the next thing I knew"—his voice became a shriek—"I was in hospital—with *this*!" He choked as he pointed to his scar, which somehow seemed to be sharing his livid rage. "I brought a case against him—and lost it through people's lies! Afterwards, he derided me! And I swore——"

He stopped abruptly. Footsteps sounded on the other side of the library door; hurried, angry footsteps; accompanied by a loud, indignant voice.

"I've had enough of this!" cried the voice. "I'm fed up with you all, fed up! I don't care who's with him, he wanted me, and he's going to have me, and if you try any more interference with me, sergeant, don't blame me if you get your face bashed in! Out of my way!"

Then the door flew open, and James Rutter burst in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

RUTTER

THE EMOTION of Rutter stole the limelight from Forsyth, practically bringing down the curtain on him. The actor became a pricked bladder, while Rutter, puffed out like the frog in the fable and just as ready to burst, filled the room with his unpleasant, volcanic personality. Behind him stood Sergeant Brown, clearly disturbed, and a little ashamed, by his inability to keep the volcano from erupting.

"Now, then, Mr. Inspector, I'm here to talk to you!" shouted Rutter.

"I certainly intend to talk to you," replied Hogarth, "and am quite ready to do so now if you don't object to other company."

He glanced at Forsyth, who stood blinking.

"It doesn't matter a twopenny damn whether you're ready or not," retorted Rutter, hotly, "and as for company, the more the merrier! All this hole-in-the-corner business—I'm done with it!—we've going to snap out of it, see? Get that! Yes, and you, too, Forsyth!" He stared at the actor suddenly, as though fully realising his presence for the first time. "Have you been saying anything about me—hey?"

"What should he say about you, that you'd object to?" inquired Hogarth. "Close the door, sergeant—we don't want to be heard all the way from Ricester."

"I suppose you think that's funny?" fumed Rutter.

"Not particularly," answered Hogarth.

"Good—we agree for once! As for objecting, I object to everything! I object to the way I'm being treated, and I'm not going to stand any more of it! Now, listen, the lot of you. This is me, for once and all—yes, and you can stick it all down in your little notebook, sergeant, and enjoy yourself! Think *I've* anything to hide? I came here to dine with Mr. Coleby because Mr. Coleby invited me to come here and dine with him. Got that? Good! Anything wrong with that? Good! It wasn't convenient, as I had an appointment in London, but I managed to return by the seven o'clock train—the seven o'clock train—got that?—and after the devil of a rush I managed to arrive here in time. After that, you all know what happened. Coleby made his confounded speech at the end of the meal, and went into the library, the lights went out

—I didn't put 'em out—somebody locked Coleby in his room—
—I didn't do it—a shot was fired—I didn't fire it, I suppose
you've had the wit to look for finger-prints?—Snagg got under
the table, there was a scuffle round at the other side of the
table—I wasn't in that—and when Coleby returned he drank
his wine and died—and I didn't poison him. Why should I
have poisoned him? Now, then! What are you looking at me
like that for, inspector?

"How am I looking at you?" asked Hogarth.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking! Somebody's been
blabbing, I expect, about my business relations with Coleby.
Snagg, eh? Snagg! Has he said anything else?" Rutter
was riding hard on the tide of indignation, but for a moment
his voice lost its assurance. Hogarth did not reply to the
question. Rutter went on: "Bah! what does it matter if he
has? A lying sneak like that! Who'd believe him? Why,
when he was in my own employment I had to have him juggled
for forgery, so who'd believe a word he said now if he tried to
get back at me——"

"I know all about Snagg," interposed Hogarth, quietly.

"Oh—you do?" answered Rutter, regarding Forsyth
speculatively. "All right, then—it won't be necessary to say
anything more about him. And *you'll* know how to take any-
thing he may have said about my business relations with John
Coleby. We began as business partners. We ended as business
rivals. That don't mean a thing—outside business it don't
mean a thing. Outside business, Coleby and I were good
friends—we didn't kiss each other, but—ah, what the hell!
Because a handkerchief was found in the hall—all right, my
handkerchief, if you like—I'm supposed to have had a hand
in all this, and to be a suspect! I don't know anything about
the handkerchief! I don't know anything about anything—or
anybody. I don't know anything about *you*, Forsyth! Or
about Codrington, whose place Boyd took, and whose body,
so I'm told, was found in the moat——"

"Do you know anything about Boyd?" interrupted
Hogarth.

"Nobody knows anything about Boyd," exclaimed Rutter.

"Somebody must," answered Hogarth, "or this somebody
wouldn't have knocked him out! Do you know anything
about that somebody?"

"What?" Again Rutter wavered for a moment, then
plunged headlong once more into his indignation. "No, I
don't!" he shouted. "But I know *this!* That after I've
spotted a suspicious character from the drawing-room window,
and have begun to organise a search for him—done something

useful at last on my own initiative, in spite of all you fellers—out we all go to look, and then we're all sent in again! I refused to go in, didn't I? You bet, I did! I've got *some* sense, and I was the only one who'd seen the chap we were looking for, so who else would have the best chance of catching him and identifying him? But, oh, no! Oh, no! We *all* had to go in—let the police do the job, no amateurs wanted! But I only came in when your sergeant and a constable threatened to use the truncheon on me!"

"And of course you had nothing on you to hit them back with?" said Hogarth.

"What do you mean? Of course not! And so here I am—and they're still looking for the chap they want!"

Hogarth shook his head.

"Oh, no, Rutter," he said, coldly, and Rutter started slightly at the omission of the "Mr." "We've got the chap we want."

Rutter's mouth opened, but no words came.

"Or, at any rate, one of them," went on Hogarth. "We've got *you*. There's nobody else out there. There never was anybody else out there. What made you raise that scare? And what did Mr. Boyd know about you that you didn't want him to tell me?"

Rutter's mouth remained open. His fingers fumbled for the comfort of his cigarette-case. The sergeant drew a little closer to him, watching him professionally.

"You're sure you wouldn't like to tell me first? Before Mr. Boyd comes round?"

Rutter took a cigarette from his case. He appeared to be doing so unconsciously, as though to build himself up again with some familiar action. His descent from the angry heights had been as sudden, and as complete, as that of Rodney Forsyth only a few minutes before.

Forsyth still seemed to be stunned by the course of events; to be unable to discover his own part in them.

Now a cigarette was in Rutter's mouth. The mouth had closed at last. A vague, unconvincing smile touched his lips. It was his attempt to imply, as he lit the cigarette, that this pause was entirely of his own making, and not due to a blank mind. He took a puff of the cigarette, then suddenly swayed, and spat it violently out. It made a sinister curve to the floor. Hogarth intruded his foot before it as Rutter swayed forward as though to regain it.

"That will do, Rutter," said Hogarth. "Sergeant, how are the men stationed?"

"Constable Ash waiting in the drawing-room, sir," answered

Brown, "I brought him back with me, and the others outside."

"Take these two back to the drawing-room, and send Ash out after the others, with instructions that they are all to join you in the drawing-room and await further orders. All eyes to be kept skinned for any further trouble meanwhile. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear, sir."

"Right. Then carry on."

Hogarth glanced towards Rutter and Forsyth. Neither offered any comment, neither seemed capable of objection. Forsyth was still looking dazed, and Rutter was looking yellow. When they had gone, Hogarth gazed at the closed door for a few moments and then picked up the still smouldering cigarette.

He put it to his nostrils, and then his lips. After that, he carefully extinguished it.

"Yes—but why?" he wondered, "should Rutter have given one of these to *Snagg*?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

MARION LACEY

MARION LACEY, pale and red-eyed, and with her black dress loosened, raised herself from her pillows. Her gold loop earrings had been at rest against the pillows, but now they quivered slightly as they suspended from her lobes, seeming like their wearer at attention. "Come in," called Marion.

She expected Jenny MacPherson back again. Jenny was a comfort; she just did pleasant helpful things and asked no questions; and it had troubled Marion when, after a period of drifting, she had opened her eyes to find that Jenny had left her. During the drifting she had been vaguely conscious of some sort of interruption or disturbance. Someone had knocked, or the bedroom door had opened. After that, Jenny must have gone. But Marion did not know why, or where, and being too tired to think, she had drifted off again, till another knock brought her eyes open once more.

But it was not Jenny who entered the room. It was Detective-Inspector Hogarth. He stood in the doorway, looking across at the bed with grave apology.

"I'm afraid we'll have to have a little chat some time, Miss Lacey," he said. "Am I too soon?"

Suddenly Marion discovered that it was not too soon. That little chat would have to come, and the sooner it was over, the better. The sooner everything was over, the better. Regardless of consequences, she needed to talk as urgently as the detective needed her to—with a desperation that he could never feel in his official breast. She would have preferred to talk to Jenny. She was not sure how much she could say to this policeman. Yet, as he stood there, not moving forward until he received her invitation, he looked less formidable than in her tortured visions, and perhaps, after all. . . .

"Yes, I'm ready," answered Marion. "There's a chair. Please sit down."

As Hogarth did so she sat up straighter, and quickly neatened her disarranged dress. Hogarth tactfully pretended not to notice, but he was noticing everything, and the thought came to him: "Odd how some types of women, by their very acts of modesty, seem to draw attention to themselves!"

"Well—who begins?" asked Marion. "I don't know the rules."

"We'll dispense with rules," replied Hogarth. "I'll leave the choice to you."

She looked at him more closely. Her dark eyes bored into him, trying to read him. He wondered whether he could have stood it as coolly if she had been ten years younger.

"Are you trying to make things easy?" she said.

"I shall try to make them as easy as I can, so long as it does not interfere with my duty," he answered.

"You never allow anything to interfere with that?"

"Never. And, as that's so, I think it's my duty to tell you that, as matters stand at present, you are under no legal obligation to tell me anything."

"I think you said something like that once before. Or didn't you? I can't quite remember—you must know my mind is not working very well just now. Anyhow, would you explain it?"

"It's quite simple. You're not under arrest, or in the witness-box. You're not under oath. If you tell me any lies while we are chatting now, you can't be had up for perjury. Otherwise," he added, with a smile, "I could already charge quite a number of people in this house."

"No, I won't tell you any lies, Mr. Hogarth," she replied. "My difficulty is to know—how much of the truth——"

"The complete truth would suit me best," said Hogarth, as she paused, "but of course I can't say whether the same applies to you. I'm not here, you know, to pronounce any judgment on ethics."

She looked at him sharply. "What made you say that?"

"It came into my mind."

"You think I was Mr. Coleby's mistress?"

"If I've pondered on that possibility, you can easily correct me."

She was silent for so long that he began to wonder whether he had dried her up. He tried not to feel sorry for her. Sympathy, he knew, could easily cloud judgment.

"Yes, I was his mistress," she said, at last. "But I don't think I should have been much longer. For the last year or two, his—interest has not been as great as it was."

"I appreciate this frankness very much, Miss Lacey," said Hogarth, "because I know how difficult it must be for you. I hope you will be able to continue it—and that's one of the reasons why I have left the sergeant and his notebook downstairs. . . . And what about *your* interest?"

"My interest?"

"Has that cooled, too?"

He had a glimpse of her very white teeth as she bit her lower lip. She answered, bitterly.

"Perhaps. But at my age—when one's dependent—it may be dangerous to think of that! Beggars can't be choosers!"

"Mr. Codrington, then, was not as well off as Mr. Coleby?"

"My God!" she murmured, her hand at her heart. "Are all detectives like you?"

"Some are very much better, and some are very much worse," he replied. "You must tell me when I blunder."

"You never blunder!"

"I am liable to blunder at every step I take. For instance, I am not sure whether your opinion of my efficiency will change when I ask you what you did after you had settled Mr. and Mrs. Peter Coleby in their room to-day? Soon after six o'clock?"

Fear entered her startled eyes. There was another long silence, and again he wondered whether he had dried her up. There was a faint dampness on her smooth forehead, and he knew her heart was racing beneath the hand that was still trying to steady it. He gave up his fight against sympathy, and allowed himself the privilege.

"Even if I'd meant to keep anything back, I see it would be useless," she said presently, in a low voice. "You know everything."

"I know a great deal, but I don't know everything," he replied, "though I intend to before I leave this house."

"Do you know who killed Mr. Coleby?"

"Did *you* kill him?"

"No!" The denial came sharply.

"Did you kill Mr. Codrington? When you met him in the grounds? By the moat?"

She turned away from him, and buried her head in her pillow.

"I think—I must have!" she sobbed.

He let her cry for a little. Then he said, quietly, "Can you go on? Or shall I come back later?"

The suggestion brought her up again, with wet eyes.

"No! Now—now!" she exclaimed. "We must get this over! It won't take long! But—give me a minute!"

He left his chair, and walked to the window. The bedroom was over the library, and the window was above the south window of the room below—the window by which stood the small table with the square frame of dust. Looking out, he could see the glow of light down the wall, and below that the faint gleam of the moat. The moon was just coming round the corner of the wall, turning the dark water to silver, and making confusing shadows and shapes. He stared down at the shapes. An evening breeze was blowing. The shapes moved vaguely, and changed their form. All but one. . . . From the room behind him came Marion's voice, flat and expressionless.

"He wanted me to go away with him. At one time I'd thought of it. I'm telling you the truth now, but I lied out in the grounds when I said the only time I'd met Mr. Codrington was the one time he had called at this house. The first time I saw him was at a previous call—a business call—at Mr. Coleby's office in Ricester—I've been doing some of Mr. Coleby's secretarial work there these last few months. We became interested in each other at that first meeting, but when Mr. Codrington followed it up with a call at the house, there was trouble. Mr. Coleby had eyes everywhere, and he could be very scathing. . . . But never mind about that. I understood him, and I'd got used to him. And—as you've already gathered—he was my bread and butter. But Mr. Codrington and I met several times after that, often in the grounds, and I think now that Mr. Coleby must have got to know of it. Otherwise would he have included Mr. Codrington in his invitations to this—this horrible dinner party? I think Mr. Codrington accepted the invitation because of me. He was afraid for me. There was no need, but—well, you know how it is with people when they feel as he did. But in the end, after accepting, he decided that he wouldn't turn up, and that I wasn't to be at the dinner, either. That was what he came here for—at six o'clock. He came to tell me, and to take me away. . . . Of course, it was impossible, but he was like that.

Impulsive. Impetuous. And when he found that I wouldn't come, he got violent, trying to force me after begging failed. I told him it would be better if I never saw him again. He asked me why. I told him because nothing but trouble could come of it. He asked me why I'd changed. I told him I'd never changed, and that"—she gave a dry, mirthless laugh—"ever since I'd been thrown on the world as a little girl and had found out what it was like, I'd always looked after Number One. 'Well, now I'm going to look after Number One,' he said, and threw his arms round me. I had to push him to get away from him. I pushed him and ran back to the house—coming in over the bridge and through the breakfast-room." Her voice began to lose its control, but after a few moments she had conquered it again, and she went on in the same flat voice so at variance with the story she told, "I didn't know what I'd done. I thought he might have gone into the moat, but I wasn't quite certain even of that. My ears were throbbing so hard that I could hardly hear anything else—it's your heart when they go like that, isn't it?—so anything I heard might have been just my heart. But perhaps I wanted it to be just my heart—the throbbing and confusion—and refused to stop and think things out. There was a lot to do, with so many people coming, and myself to get calm again. And of course—of course—this is all the truth—it never came into my mind, never for a moment, that Mr. Codrington had come to any serious harm. Just a wetting, at most. Nothing more than that. He'd pick himself up and go away. It was the servants I was terrified about. One of them might have heard something. The butler or any of them. . . . I didn't know that Mr. Codrington had hit his head as he fell in."

Hogarth had not left the window. Her voice came to him clearly, and when he recalled her story afterwards it was always against the background of the glowing moonlight and the silvery moat at which he gazed while she was telling it. Now he turned from the window, and faced the bed. She was sitting up, bending slightly forward, with her fingers tightly clasped in her lap.

"How do you know now that he hit his head?" he asked. She raised her eyes and looked at him.

"Are you forgetting? I identified him. I saw his forehead then."

He nodded. "And it wasn't till then——?"

"No. Of course not. It wasn't till then," she answered.

"Can you go on a little longer?"

"You know everything."

"About Mr. Codrington, yes, but not about Mr. Coleby. Mr. Codrington couldn't have poisoned Mr. Coleby. I've known that all along, for he died some three hours before Mr. Coleby, and anyhow, as you've just told me, he tried another solution of his problem. And *you* didn't poison Mr. Coleby."

"You believe I didn't?"

"Of course. Have you any idea yourself who did poison him?"

"No," she shook her head.

"None at all?"

"None at all."

"You were watching him, I suppose, like all the others, as he drank?"

"Yes."

"Closely?"

"We were all watching him closely."

"The situation being so tense, eh?"

"He'd worked it up into a nightmare."

"Now answer this quickly, without thinking. The moment I ask it. Recall the instant immediately after he had drunk the wine. What's in your mind?"

"His expression," she answered without hesitation.

"Yes?"

"The—the consternation of it. The sheer consternation of it. That's what stays in my mind. He'd been so cynical—so confident—just before."

"Thank you," said Hogarth. He felt puzzled, and he turned back to the window for a moment. Staring out into the moonlight, he asked, "Did you notice anything about anybody else?"

"No," she replied.

"From where you were sitting you would have had a view of those who were nearest to Mr. Coleby on the other side of the table—Mrs. Peter Coleby, Mr. MacPherson."

"I didn't notice anything."

"And next to Mr. MacPherson, Mr. Boyd?"

"No, nothing."

"Who is Mr. Boyd? Why is he here? I can't find any one who knows a thing about him!"

"I don't know a thing about him myself," replied Marion.

"But Mr. Coleby must have known him." He turned to her again, inquiring. "Don't you agree?"

"It's all too confusing—I don't really know. At first I thought Mr. Coleby didn't know him—then I wondered. He may have believed that Mr. Boyd might be the anonymous correspondent he was trying to catch. Yes, that may have

been why he asked him to stay. Mr. Boyd certainly wasn't invited to the dinner."

She looked weary. Her voice was tired.

"I won't keep you much longer," said Hogarth, taking pity on her, "but there is just one more point you can help me with. It's about Mr. Coleby's father—Adam Coleby. Can you tell me why an invalid like Mr. Adam Coleby was present at this dinner—and why he seemed so anxious to remain as long as he was allowed to?"

After a moment of thought, Marion answered, "I have never felt that I understood Mr. Adam Coleby. He was an invalid long before I came here, and he has always been—just the same. I assist in looking after him, but I have never understood him. He's—uncanny."

"In what way, uncanny?" pressed Hogarth.

"It may be just his condition. I'm quite efficient with ill people, but I'm never really at home with them. I think what is beyond me to understand in Mr. Coleby—Mr. Adam Coleby—is his queer patience."

"Ill people often grow patient. But you mean something more than that, don't you? Will you try and explain it?"

"I don't believe I can. He always seems, somehow, to be—waiting."

"Well, that might explain it. Waiting for what?"

"How do I know?"

"For death?"

"Oh, yes. Probably that."

She began a little shiver.

"His death?"

The shiver did not complete itself. She became suddenly rigid.

"What was the trouble between John Coleby and his father?" asked Hogarth quickly.

Mechanically she answered, "They were too much alike—they hated each other."

He left her staring with incredulous eyes at the opposite wall.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

LEONARD BOYD

HOGARTH met Jenny MacPherson outside Marion's door. The girl looked worried, but she smiled.

"I was just coming back—I wasn't listening," she said. "How is she?"

"Worn out, naturally," answered Hogarth. "She's probably been through a bigger strain than anybody here."

"Poor thing! That's what I'm thinking. Did she talk to you?"

"We had a chat. Did she talk to *you*?"

Jenny shook her head. "Maybe she would have, if I'd encouraged her, but I thought it best for her to lie quiet. Maybe she'll talk to me later."

"I think it would do her good."

She looked at him with quizzical solemnity. "And you wouldn't be minding if it did?"

"Why should I mind?" inquired Hogarth.

"Well, I was just thinking that you'd no be so sympathetic to a body you were going to arrest."

"You ought to join the force—you've quite a clever way of seeking information, Miss MacPherson," replied Hogarth.

"If you would like to know it, there is no more evidence that Miss Lacey was responsible for Mr. Coleby's death than there is that you yourself were."

"Thank you."

"Was that why you were looking so worried just now?"

"Oh, no! It was Mr. Boyd."

"What—is he bad?"

"His temper is! He's gone to the library to see you."

"Gone to the library!" exclaimed Hogarth. "Then he's come to——"

"Ay, and as the doctor wasn't by, but only myself, there was no ordering him. He ought to be staying quiet, now—as I hope you'll be telling him."

"If he's got something on his chest, the best thing for him may be to get it off," answered Hogarth. "I must go down to him at once. By the way, you seem to be turning yourself into a hospital nurse, Miss MacPherson, and we all ought to be very grateful to you. Where is the doctor?"

"I'm thinking he may be back in Mr. Coleby's room, for he

seemed to be wanting to get there when I looked in to see how poor Mr. Boyd was, and maybe that was why he asked me to stay."

The sergeant's voice broke into their conversation. He had just come up the stairs.

"No, he isn't there, sir," said Brown. "Dr. Dawson's gone off."

"The deuce he has!" exclaimed Hogarth, frowning. "Without first seeing me?"

"Said he couldn't wait! Said he was in a hurry! No good me trying to stop him! You know Dr. Dawson, sir, when he gets like that."

"How did he go?"

"Ah, this is the plum, sir! We couldn't spare the cars, of course, so he went off on Codrington's motor-bike!"

Hogarth swore under his breath.

"And Mr. Boyd's down in the library, sir, waiting to see you—and he seems a bit excited like, too. That's another thing I came up to tell you. And that's not all——"

He winked darkly, and Hogarth moved aside with him. They exchanged a few whispered words, but what Brown told Hogarth was no more interesting than what Hogarth told Brown. The sergeant's eyebrows shot up as he received an instruction. Then, after a nod to Jenny, Hogarth descended alone to the library. But he paid short visits to Smith in the cloakroom, and to the drawing-room, first.

He found Leonard waiting for him with a bandage round his head, and the Australian's mood was very different, as the sergeant had implied, from his earlier calm. But Hogarth had never completely believed in that calm exterior, and he deduced that a controlled emotion beneath the surface had now been released by the physical and mental effects of rough treatment. He had seen, and noted, a glimpse of it when Leonard had been shown the torn photograph.

It was Leonard who spoke first. He drove straight to the point, without mincing his words.

"How much more of this are we going to have?" he burst out. "What's going to be the next? Nobody's safe! There's a madman about! I don't know what's happened to all the others, but three things have happened to me that have got to be cleared up before there's a fourth! Something is found in my pocket—you found it yourself—that was never originally there, a photograph in my overcoat hanging in the cloakroom is torn up, and then somebody gives me a crack on the head and knocks me out in the grounds! When are you going to stop it?"

"In a very few minutes, I hope," answered Hogarth, "and you can help me. But first, stretch out on that couch."

"No, thanks——"

"I insist. The doctor has deserted you, after which you deserted your hospital nurse——"

"Hospital nurse?"

"Miss MacPherson. She's anxious about you, and so am I, and now I'm in charge. Lie on the couch, and show me that although that knock has excited you, it hasn't knocked the sense out of you. We can't afford to lose any sense just now. There's not much about."

Leonard smiled faintly. The detective's words and quiet manner took effect. Nice of Miss MacPherson to be anxious about him, too. . . . He steadied his mind. He recalled that he despised lack of control.

"I reckon you're right," he said, as he moved to the couch.

"I'm not always right, but I'm right sometimes," answered Hogarth. "Now, then, let's deal with those three points you've just mentioned. First, the knock on the head. I can explain that to you. I can tell you who did it?"

"What—you've caught the fellow?"

"Which fellow?"

"The fellow we were after?"

"Who saw the fellow you were after?"

"Why, Rutter."

"No, he didn't. There wasn't any fellow. It was a ruse to get you all out in the grounds, and you particularly, so you could receive that knock on the head. I imagine it was meant to be a bit harder. Rutter gave it to you."

Leonard looked astounded, but realisation dawned as the detective continued:

"With a bronze paper-weight. It's small, but heavy, in the shape of a globe. Did you notice it on the little desk by the back window of the drawing-room?"

"No."

"Well, I noticed it, and it's not there now. It has been found in the grounds, my sergeant has just told me, not very far from those bushes where you were attacked from behind. But it was there on the desk when Rutter was by the window, reporting his mythical man in the garden. He took it out with him, and probably he meant to replace it afterwards, but the situation beat him and he chucked it away. Rutter is a short-sighted man, influenced by the moment and by unintelligent impulses—that's probably why he's been such a failure in business. My finger-print expert is looking for finger-prints on

that paper-weight now—just as a matter of routine, to check up. He'll find Rutter's.

"I dare say the whole thing came into Rutter's very worried mind in an instant of folly," continued Hogarth. "Anyhow, here is what happened. He reported his mythical man, turned the constable back from the window on the plea of urgency, and started the rush into the grounds. He made sure you joined the rush. He watched your movements, and probably engineered the little business among the bushes that took you to them. He was quick—and lucky—because after you spoke to MacPherson and myself—you remember?"

Leonard nodded.

"After that, we followed you, and if MacPherson hadn't tripped you might have been spared that crack on the head. As it was, Rutter had just time to hide from you, spring at you from behind, give you the bang, and then vanish, to reappear after MacPherson and I got to you as though he had only just arrived on the scene. Then he ran on again, pretending he'd spotted your assailant, and he kept the thing up even after I had ordered everybody back to the house, probably for the sake of appearances, or while wondering what to do with the paper-weight. Rutter's a rascal, but fortunately he's also a fool. Well, does it all fit?"

Leonard nodded again.

"So, now," concluded Hogarth, "what is it that Rutter didn't want you to tell me about him?"

"This," answered Leonard. "That he didn't arrive back from London this evening at 7 o'clock. He was on the 4.30—the same train as myself."

"Good!" exclaimed Hogarth, with satisfaction. "I never believed that time-table of his. It was quite impossible. And now, I hope you are going to tell me why he was so keen to conceal the fact that he had arrived at 4.30?"

"Well, I can go part of the way for you," said Leonard, "but not all. Rutter met Snagg at the station."

"Very interesting. Go on."

"They contacted in the tea-room, where I was having my own tea at a table some little way off. Snagg was already there—I take it, by appointment—and Rutter joined him from the train. They talked in low voices like a couple of conspirators, and—here's a little thing I noticed. Rutter gave Snagg a piece of paper, after writing or drawing on it, and they studied it together. Then Rutter left, ahead of Snagg. I'm afraid that's all. Not so very much."

"Oh, quite a good deal, Mr. Boyd," replied Hogarth.

"They didn't arrive here together," said Leonard.

"No, they wouldn't." Hogarth was silent for nearly a minute. Then he went on, "The piece of paper handed to Snagg by Rutter was the plan of the grounds that I found on him. The spot marked with the cross was where Codrington was found in the moat."

"Codrington!" exclaimed Boyd. "There's been so much, I'd almost forgotten about Codrington! Do you mean that——"

"No, I don't," interrupted Hogarth. "The fact that Codrington died at that spot is the one coincidence I've so far found in this case. Naturally, at first, I connected Snagg with Codrington's death in my mind, but it didn't make sense. . . . And, perhaps, it isn't completely a coincidence," he exclaimed suddenly. "Wait a moment!" He thought again. "That spot, I noticed, is a particularly dangerous one—quite an easy place from which any one could fall or be pushed in. In the case of Codrington, it was an accident——"

"You know that?" interrupted Leonard, sharply.

"Yes, I know that. But if somebody else had fallen in—the affair engineered, say, by a mind which has already given us one example of how it can create a diversion—it might not have been an accident, eh? Only, instead of being drowned, this somebody else met another fate, and was poisoned first." He paced up and down for a few moments, stopping in front of the couch. "I'm saying rather a lot to you, Mr. Boyd."

"I take it as a compliment," replied Leonard.

"Perhaps you'll return the compliment later by being as frank with me as I am being with you," smiled Hogarth. "But I've another reason. I've reached a point at which I want to do some of my thinking aloud, and for a little while I have lost my sergeant."

He walked to the window beneath which was the table with its intriguing frame of dust, looked out, and then came away again. Then, almost as though he had forgotten Leonard's presence, he walked slowly round the room, examining surfaces. "This room hasn't been dusted recently," he said. "I have an idea that, if we inquired, we should find that Mr. Coleby had not allowed the servants in lately." He paused at the book-covered wall opposite the window from which he had just peered. He passed a hand lightly along some of the rows. His fingers stopped at a volume which protruded an inch from the neatly arranged volumes on either side. It was the protrusion of the book that had arrested the smooth passage of his fingers. The cover was light brown, and his eyes became momentarily fixed on the black-lettered title on the

back : *Secret Hiding Places*, by Granville Squiers. Then he completed his tour round the room, returning to the couch, and bringing his mind back to the point he had been discussing with Leonard Boyd.

"Listen," he said. "Everybody here, it seems, had something up against Mr. Coleby. Including, I have no doubt, yourself. Both Rutter and Snagg most certainly had—and Snagg, who appears to have lost whatever initiative he may once have possessed, is now anybody's tool. Like Rutter, he arrived here with one drugged cigarette—supplied, I am assuming, by Rutter—and, again like Rutter, after Coleby's death Snagg once forgot himself and lit the cigarette he had intended for another——"

"You mean, for Coleby?" interposed Leonard.

"Yes. Exactly what the plan was doesn't matter. An if-we-get-the-chance sort of thing, very likely, in which case a drugged cigarette might have been a useful preliminary for violence afterwards, or a shove into the moat. Anyhow, I am satisfied that I have sufficient evidence to suit myself, if not a jury, that the plan existed. So now, Mr. Boyd, let us pass on to the next of your three items—the little tube of poison I found in your pocket. How did it get there?"

Leonard looked at the detective squarely.

"It wasn't in my pocket when I arrived," he declared.

"I didn't suppose it was," answered Hogarth, "and that's another compliment."

"Well, don't pay me too many, or I may think you're buttering me up for some dark purpose!"

"Perhaps I am. Have you any theory about that tube?"

"Only the obvious one."

"Which is?"

"That somebody planted it on me."

Hogarth nodded.

"If you didn't have it when you arrived here, and if it didn't get into your pocket by accident, then somebody must have planted it on you, so the next inquiry is—who did?"

"I've no idea," replied Leonard. "Have you?"

"I've a very good idea," said Hogarth. "It was your antagonist in that scuffle in the dark."

"What! MacPherson?" exclaimed Leonard.

"No, not MacPherson. You ended the scuffle with MacPherson, but you began it with somebody else. From the details I've been given, here's what could very easily have happened—though you will tell me if I've got any of the details wrong. Now please take your mind back. It is dark. Peter Coleby has struck his match, and it has gone out as

Mrs. Dixon sways against him. The match falls on Mr. Dixon, who yelps. Well, what's the next thing that happened ? ”

“ I think it was Miss MacPherson's exclamation that somebody was moving behind our chairs,” answered Leonard.

“ Which brought you out of yours.”

“ Yes. I grabbed somebody, and he slipped out of my grasp. A moment or two later I grabbed somebody else—at least, we're agreeing it must have been somebody else—and, after the shot, when Mr. Coleby returned with the candle, I found it was MacPherson. Wait a bit. Snagg dived under the table. Was he the chap who got up first and who I went for ? And did he—or Rutter, if they were working together—write that anonymous letter ? ”

Hogarth shook his head. “ That doesn't fit psychologically,” he said. “ Snagg might possibly be the type, but Rutter isn't, and they *were* working together. You want to look for somebody with a streak of madness in his make-up—and someone, incidentally, who was closer to you than either Snagg or Rutter.”

“ You mean, Forsyth ? ”

“ Yes, Forsyth. He had both opportunity and motive. I know he was sitting in his chair when Mr. Coleby came back with the candle, but either the scuffle or the shot should have brought him to his feet. They didn't, because he was already on his feet. As soon as the match went out he got up, thinking maybe it was now or never, and hoping to reach Coleby's place in the dark. Miss MacPherson and you interfered with that.”

“ But—that was mad ! ” exclaimed Leonard.

“ Would you diagnose Rodney Forsyth as completely sane ? Of course it was mad, and so was what he did next in his flurry. His madness ebbs and flows like an advancing tide. He slipped the poison into your pocket, and then quickly sat down again—looking of course as though he had never moved, and declaring afterwards that he had not. Well ? ”

Leonard considered the detective's words, frowning. “ Yes, I expect it was Forsyth,” he grunted. “ A pretty low-down trick ! ” Suddenly he added, “ Yes, but—*did* he poison Coleby.”

Carefully Hogarth took the little bottle from his pocket.

“ Look,” he said. “ It's still full.”

“ Yes ! And we know Forsyth didn't reach Coleby's place.”

“ He undoubtedly didn't that time.”

“ He had no opportunity afterwards—and even if he had, and your deductions are right, the poison was in my pocket, not his, by then ! ”

Hogarth nodded.

"Quite correct. All we have proved so far is how Forsyth got rid of the poison, not that he used it. If he *had* used it, he would probably have tried to get rid of it afterwards in a similar way. As a matter of fact, you'll be interested to know that Forsyth's finger-prints, not yours, are on the bottle—otherwise I might have been a little less confidential."

"You know, this has got me tied up properly," remarked Leonard, after a pause. "I can't make any sense of it at all! I suppose we're to take it that Forsyth wrote that anonymous letter, then? The one that contained the threat to Coleby, and that he passed round the table?"

"That's my belief, Mr. Boyd," replied Hogarth. "Something happened to Forsyth that twisted his brain as well as his looks, though up till now he's escaped the asylum."

"And, just as he planted the poison on me," went on Leonard, "he planted that envelope in Mr. Dixon's overcoat pocket, eh? To make it appear that Dixon was the anonymous correspondent? Is that the idea?"

"Well, you can help me to verify that idea or explode it," answered Hogarth. "The overcoats were in the cloakroom at the far end of the hall. Did Forsyth have the opportunity? Did he arrive after the Dixons?"

"No, before," said Leonard, definitely. "I remember because he had arrived and was in the drawing-room when I got here—he was the only guest who was—and the Dixons didn't come along till quite a while after."

"How long before the dinner began did they arrive?"

"I should say about a quarter of an hour."

"Did Forsyth leave the drawing-room during that quarter of an hour?"

"No, I'm sure he didn't. Anyhow, not to go to the cloakroom."

"How do you know that?"

"Because the only time I left was to go to the cloakroom myself."

"Do you remember whether, on your way to the dining-room, Forsyth went to the cloakroom?"

Leonard shook his head. "We all went in the dining-room in a bunch."

"Then, if anybody slipped the envelope into Mr. Dixon's overcoat pocket, it couldn't have been Forsyth. Nor could he have taken that handkerchief out of Rutter's overcoat pocket, or—to come now to your third point, Mr. Boyd—could he have torn up the photograph which was in your own. What is your explanation of *that*?"

There was a silence of many seconds. Leonard's face grew

stern. Then, suddenly, his expression relaxed as he made his decision.

"Not a single soul here knew of that photograph," he said, "and of course it wasn't torn when I arrived. I can only conclude that—somebody got on to it, and that this somebody tore it up."

"The somebody being——?"

"Mr. Coleby."

"Then he had some special interest in it?" asked Hogarth. Leonard drew a sharp breath.

"Tell me, Mr. Hogarth," he replied. "You've been asking a lot of questions, and of course a number of them have been about John Coleby. Have you learned anything from anybody yet about his early life?"

"I've learned this," said Hogarth. "As a boy he wasn't happy here. His father ruled him, I gather, with a rod of iron. So he ran away to Australia and spent a number of years there. I know nothing of what happened in Australia. When he came back, it was to a paralysed father and an orphaned nephew. After that he set up in business, and—ruled the roost. Became the martinet his father had been before him. Well, is that as far as you require me to go?"

"Yes," answered Leonard. "You evidently know all you need to know about John Coleby apart from the Australian gap, and I can fill that in for you. It's pretty clear he never filled it in himself! He was in Australia for ten years. After working his passage out as a boy of fifteen, he moved about a bit, and settled down at last on a sheep farm. He worked hard and well, and presently became a partner. Money rolled in, and as Coleby's partner—the man who had originally engaged him, and to whom he owed everything—as this partner began to fail in health, Coleby wasn't as scrupulous as he should have been over money matters, and saw he got the lion's share. There was some shady business. I don't know exactly what it was. Anyhow, Coleby thought it better at last to run away a second time—this time back to England. His partner's name was Boyd."

"I see," murmured Hogarth. "Or—do I?"

"You may," responded Leonard, smiling grimly. "You've eyes in the back of your head! But if you don't, you will in a moment. Boyd died very soon after, and that photograph was a picture of Boyd's daughter as a girl. A few months ago—just before she died herself—she told me some things about John Coleby, and so I thought I'd make a few inquiries and come over and have a look at him myself. I'm her son—and Coleby's." He paused, and again the stern look tautened his

features. "I reckon that was another reason why John Coleby ran away. He went before I was born. You gather, of course, there wasn't any marriage. . . . Oh, yes, Mr. Hogarth, I had something up against John Coleby, the same as others here. So you can mark that up against me, if you want to."

Hogarth made no comment for a little while. Leonard had risen from the couch while telling his story, and he looked tired. The detective watched him quietly, and saw him presently raise his eyes to the picture over the fireplace and stare at it with an odd sort of fascination.

"Not one of your ancestors, I imagine," said Hogarth.

"No, of course not," answered Leonard. "But why do I see a resemblance?"

"It's a resemblance of mind, rather than of body. Machiavelli belonged to a type your father evidently admired and to which perhaps he belonged himself. One more question, and then I won't keep you any longer. Did your father know who you were when you turned up this evening?"

Leonard kept his eyes on the cynical picture as he considered the question thoughtfully.

"I gave my name," he answered. "Later, the photograph, which he found and tore in two, proved my identity to him."

"Have you any idea——"

"Why it was torn?" Leonard shrugged his broad shoulders. "A gesture, I reckon. . . . Here's a present for you, inspector. When your sergeant showed me the damage, I could have murdered the man who had caused it, if he hadn't been already dead. And now you tell me something in return. Who tried to shoot me in the dark—and why?"

"No one tried to shoot you in the dark," replied Hogarth. "There are many facets to this case, Mr. Boyd—facets of elaborate planning and of small momentary impulses, all playing across each other to confuse the vision. At one end, the long-sighted, subtle, Machiavellian touch—at the other, silly little impulses that sent a stupid man under the table like a frightened rabbit—and that caused another stupid man, equally frightened in his way, to arrive at this dinner-party with a loaded revolver with which to threaten or defend himself against his terrifying host. I am quite sure that Mr. Dixon is not used to firearms, and that it went off by accident when he panicked and drew it from his pocket after the match had been dropped and had gone out on his hand. The noise of the scuffle finished him off, and he tried to get rid of the revolver afterwards by thrusting it under the table. If it did not slide as far as Miss Lacey's feet, where it was found, and only travelled as far as Rutter's, Rutter possibly saw it and

kicked it on. Anyhow, Dixon fired that shot, for although we have his denial, we also have his finger-prints. Thank you, Mr. Boyd. You have given me all the information you can, and I am very much obliged to you."

At the door, Leonard shot a direct question.

"Do you know who killed my father?"

"Oh yes, I know who killed your father," replied Hogarth, "but—even after all this—I am not yet out of the dark."

Although Hogarth had just stated that he knew who had killed John Coleby, he was himself asking the direct question a couple of minutes later, in the bedroom of old Adam Coleby. Old Adam was wide awake, and betrayed no flicker of distress at the detective's visit.

"Mr. Coleby," said Hogarth, "please forgive me for troubling you, but I want to ask you a question. I know that when you close your right eye it means yes, and that when you close your left eye it means no. Do you know who killed your son?"

Old Adam took ten seconds before he decided on his answer. Then, with a change of expression so faint that it could only have been detected by any one closely watching for it, the old man very slowly closed his right eye.

"Thank you," said Hogarth. "Now I am going to mention in turn the names of every one who sat round the dining-table. Please stop me when I come to the right one."

He gave the names, pausing for a moment after each. He gave them all, and the old man's eyelids never flickered. He went through them a second time, while Adam Coleby stared back at him like a Sphinx. More disappointed than surprised, Hogarth left the room with a sigh.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

PRELUDE TO SOLUTION

SERGEANT BROWN was in the library when Hogarth returned to it. He was standing in the middle of the floor, and on the ground beside him was an object concealed beneath a white tea-cloth. The tea-cloth showed signs of dampness, and so did the carpet immediately around it.

"Good! You got it," said Hogarth.

"Yes, we got it," answered the sergeant, with grim satisfaction. "And covered it up, like you said."

"You gave the instruction that no word was to be spoken about this?"

"I did, sir."

"Right! Then now let's get to work!"

The next ten minutes were more interesting, Brown declared afterwards, than any he had previously known. The object was uncovered, and placed on the table within the frame of dust. It fitted into the frame exactly. After this, certain tests were made. "Well, sir, that fixes it, doesn't it?" exclaimed Brown, when the tests had been completed.

But Hogarth shook his head.

"Only a part of it," he replied. "There are two other essential points that have got to be cleared up. I think I am on the track of one, but the other so far has me beaten hollow."

"What are they, sir?" asked Brown.

"They are so obvious that I shouldn't have to tell you," answered Hogarth. "Build up the case in your mind, and you must see that two essential links are lacking."

"You mean, the lights?"

"That's one of them, of course."

"Yes, that's a fair puzzle. And why——?"

"Exactly! Why? That's a bigger puzzle. By the way, have you noticed that the library door can be bolted on this side?"

Brown examined the bolt, and nodded.

"I expect there were times when Mr. Coleby didn't want to be disturbed," he remarked.

"I am quite sure of that," agreed Hogarth, "and one of the times occurred very recently. Well, now let us see whether

we can find one of the two remaining missing links. I believe I know where to look for it."

Two minutes later, while Brown was rubbing his astonished eyes, the telephone bell sounded. Hogarth ran into the hall to answer it.

"Yes, this is Inspector Hogarth speaking," he called.

Then he listened. It was the person at the other end who did the talking. Hogarth confined his own share to monosyllabic utterances, and when he replaced the receiver he stood for a number of seconds with his eyes fixed upon the instrument, absorbing the information it had brought him.

The telephone bell had been heard in the drawing-room, but no one made any move to answer it. The drawing-room had the atmosphere of a prison, and although no charge had been made against any one and, as matters stood, there was no legal compulsion on any one to stay, the thought of leaving did not occur to a single inmate, and more than one believed than an attempt to leave would lead to an immediate worsening of the situation. These were the inmates with uneasy consciences, to whom the presence of the constables was a warning symbol.

Mr. and Mrs. Dixon were sitting together, silent and frightened of the future. Knowledge that had been secret had been forced from them, and although they no longer feared their blackmailer, his shadow still loomed over them, since by his death their unfortunate position had been brought into the light.

Rutter was stretched out on the settee, staring with unseeing eyes up to the ceiling. What was to be *his* immediate future? Whatever he had plotted, whatever he had done or intended to do, could anything be proved against him? Damn that detective! A pity somebody hadn't shoved *him* into the moat! Rutter would have done it with pleasure if he could have got away with it. But the trouble with Rutter was that he wasn't clever. He never had been clever, and the knowledge had rankled all his life as one person after another got the better of him! Why, even that bloody worm Snagg had duped him for a while before he had caught him out at the forgery game. It had been a mistake, thought Rutter gloomily, to send the fellow to prison. He ought to have kept him, using his power over him, instead of letting Coleby reap the benefit! Blast the worm! . . .

While these unchristian thoughts passed round and round through Rutter's brain, the subject of them sat on a chair in a corner with his eyes closed. He was pretending, hard, that he had never been born.

Rodney Forsyth was also sitting in a chair with his eyes closed. He felt tremendously tired. As he used to feel after playing a highly emotional part, when the curtain had fallen. . . . Great man, Shakespeare. A pity they had never met. They would have got on well together, and he would like Shakespeare to have seen his Hamlet. And to have heard the applause. . . . Yes—there it goes. How many curtains was that? Seven? Enough! He would not appear any more. He was too tired. He could not even remember what part he had just acted. Only that it was something that had taken everything out of him. Let them play God Save the King, so the audience could go home. He would not appear any more. Never any more . . . with this throbbing head. . . .

"Peter!" whispered Phyllis.

"What?" he whispered back.

"When all this is over—could we live here—after *this*?"

She had been drifting away into visions, and had been picturing the house with only themselves and servants in it—and perhaps someone very small in a bedroom upstairs. There was sunlight everywhere. The drawing-room was filled with an afternoon glow, and a maid was bringing in a tea-tray glittering with a silver teapot, milk-jug and sugar-basin. The wireless, turned low, was playing soft music. There were hot tea-cakes. Afterwards, they would play tennis. . . . And in the evening. . . . And then, all at once, she had come back, and gazed almost unbelievably at the people all around her.

"When this is all over," replied Peter, "you'll find that we can do anything. Anything we like! Hang on to that!"

Why not think it, anyway? He squeezed her arm.

MacPherson turned a page. He had found a volume of Walter Scott.

Two other people heard the telephone bell from the top stairs of the staircase, and one of them, Jenny MacPherson, stood up and peered down into the hall over the balustrade. "The inspector's answering it," she reported, a few moments later, to a man with a bandage round his head. Leonard had refused, after his interview with Hogarth, to go back to the drawing-room. He had been afraid of what he might have done to Rutter.

"Good chap, that inspector," he said, as Jenny returned to the place beside him.

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye.

"Was that your opinion when you went to beard him in the library?" she asked.

"I changed my opinion," he smiled. "That was just—the nervy condition I was in."

"Ah, I wasn't blaming you!"

"Of course not. He called you the hospital nurse, by the way. Nice, the way you've been looking after people. And—to be anxious about me."

"And who's been telling you that?"

"Hogarth. When he made me lie down on the couch instead of raging up and down as I wanted to! He treated me the right way—and I told him all he wanted to know about me."

She was silent.

"P'r'aps I'll tell you some time, if you're interested," he added, "and, of course, if he doesn't get in first. I'm rather wondering how to-night is going to wind up."

"How is your head?"

"Fine."

"It's the hospital nurse asking."

"I beg your pardon. Aching a bit."

"Then you'll stay quiet. You've talked as much as is good for you. Sit still now, and say nothing."

"Bit boring for you?" he suggested.

"Hospital nurses expect to be bored," she retorted. "Do as I say!"

They heard Hogarth go along the hall to the cloakroom, and then return to the library. They sat on the stairs in silence for five minutes. It was a very pleasant five minutes. Then, below them, the dining-room door opened once more, and Sergeant Brown came out. He came into their line of vision as he passed beyond the foot of the stairs towards the drawing-room. They heard him say, "If you please, ladies and gentlemen, will you all step into the dining-room?" They glanced at each other, rose from the stair, and went down.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

JOHN COLEBY'S GHOST

OF THE original thirteen who had sat round the oval table at John Coleby's last meal, nine were now reassembled in the dining-room. The four absentees were Marion Lacey, Adam Coleby, John Coleby himself, and Rodney Forsyth. The rest had been ushered into Inspector Hogarth's presence by Sergeant Brown, to wait in silent apprehension for the final act. Not all of them sat down. Some preferred to stand, giving the table a wide berth as though afraid of being drawn once more within the influence of its long and sinister orbit. The Reverend

Eldred Dixon had a small oval table in his study at home. He decided, if he ever saw home again, to sell it.

"Where's Forsyth?" asked Hogarth, after a quick glance round the room.

"Missing—we're looking for him," reported Brown.

The sergeant and the inspector exchanged glances. They were adept at mute conversation. The sergeant's eyebrows asked whether Hogarth wanted to wait. After a moment of thought Hogarth's expression informed the sergeant that he did not mean to wait for he counted on the sergeant to have covered the new development. The reply to this was a corroborative wink.

Then Hogarth turned to the others :

"I'm afraid this has been a very trying evening for you all," he said, "and I'd like to thank those of you who have been patient and helpful. I have to do my job, but apart from that I shall respect all confidences that have been made to me to-night."

He carefully refrained from looking at anybody directly, but out of the corner of his eye he noted more than one relieved expression. He went on :

"There have been four main incidents to investigate. The death of Mr. Coleby, the death of Mr. Codrington, the assault on Mr. Boyd, and the firing of a revolver——"

Suddenly the Reverend Eldred Dixon sprang to his feet.

"I did that!" he cried. "God forgive me! I did that!"

The next moment he looked aghast at himself, and his wife glared at him with astonished indignation. This public announcement was hardly in tune with a Purity Campaign. But Hogarth knew that the clergyman had responded to a very wise impulse.

"Would you care to tell us why, Mr. Dixon?" he asked, and added kindly, "No unnecessary details, you know—just the bare facts."

"The bare facts!" gulped Mr. Dixon. Avoiding his wife's eye, he waved a trembling hand towards the oval table. "Well—aren't the bare facts there? Look at them! An ungodly sight! An ungodly invitation! Yes—who doubts it?—Mr. Coleby invited us here to frighten us! And—I ask—was I the only one here who—who feared him? So I brought the revolver with me—just in case—for protection—and when there was all that trouble in the dark"—his voice, which had become shrill, now dropped to a lower tone—"it went off. Accidentally. Of course, accidentally!"

Unable to miss any chance of being unpleasant, Rutter remarked, sarcastically :

"Of course it was an accident! Who would doubt a clergyman? He just waved a revolver about for fun, and it went off!"

"Are you insinuating anything, sir?" demanded Mr. Dixon.

"Well, it was lucky for you that you missed, wasn't it?" sneered Rutter.

It was, for Rutter, an unfortunate intervention, and he realised it just too late. With a grim expression, Leonard Boyd intervened.

"I for one, accept Mr. Dixon's explanation," he said, turning to Hogarth, "but as I am from the other side of the world, and not quite certain of your laws here, may I put a question?"

"Certainly," nodded Hogarth.

For the time being he had been quite content to listen.

"It's this. Suppose—just for the sake of argument, you understand—suppose Mr. Dixon *had* intended to shoot someone—me, for instance—but had missed? How would he have stood? In the eyes of your law?"

Hogarth was not the only one in the room who understood the real purport of the question. It was not Mr. Dixon's case that was being considered. After a moment of thought, Hogarth replied:

"Assuming he was not acting in self-defence, he would of course be liable for attempted murder. But like you, sir, and I am sure like all the rest of us here, I accept Mr. Dixon's explanation that there was no such attempt." He glanced at Rutter. "In the circumstances, I consider it only fair to Mr. Dixon to make this statement."

"All right, very well, in that case, drop it!" snapped Rutter.

But Leonard refused to drop it.

"Thanks for your information, inspector," he said, with doggedness of purpose, "but somehow I'd like to get everything quite cleaned up. Suppose—with murder in his mind—Mr. Dixon hadn't got as far as firing the pistol. But maybe I'm not being fair. Let's leave Mr. Dixon out of it, and let's suppose that some other of the guests—myself, if you like, included—arrived here with the intention of killing Mr. Coleby, but—as we may be about to learn—someone else got in first? How would we stand? Again, of course, in the eyes of your law? I'm not speaking of the verdict of God. I think it might be useful to hear your view about that, inspector?"

Hogarth appreciated the question. The air needed clearing, covered warnings were necessary, and Leonard was providing

an opening. Choosing his words very carefully, Hogarth said :

" Yes, I think it may be as well to explain that to you all. Naturally the law cannot touch a man who merely conceives the idea of a murder—that is to say, who conceives it in his mind, but does nothing towards achieving it in actual fact. But if we come across any evidence that homicide is contemplated, we note it even if, lacking proof positive, we cannot act upon it. It goes down, so to speak, on record. So the individual with the black mark against him, if sane, thanks heaven for a lucky escape and tries to mend his ways, realising that next time he might not be so lucky. Of course, if he is *not* sane"—Hogarth paused for an instant. " Well, then we may have to act in co-operation with medical opinion."

" Thank you," said Leonard, with a faint smile. " I reckon that puts the situation to us very nicely."

" Then we'll pass from the revolver shot to the assault," said Hogarth. " Do you wish to charge anybody here with that, Mr. Boyd ? "

Leonard looked at Rutter. Rutter's expression was not happy. He was cursing himself for having opened his mouth.

" What would you do in my place, Rutter ? " asked Leonard.

" What's it to do with me ? " exclaimed Rutter nervily, and Leonard laughed.

" No, I'm not charging anybody—yet," he said to Hogarth. " I'll think about it."

Hogarth nodded. " Then we can come to the two actual fatalities. I don't propose to say much about Mr. Codrington's death, because he wasn't known personally to anybody here, and no one here is connected either directly or indirectly with his decease. You will learn what it is necessary for the public to learn at the inquest. Meanwhile the police view will most probably be that no foul play occurred in this case—that it was an accident—and the verdict will assumedly be along those lines. I think I can venture that forecast. . . . Which brings us now to the death of Mr. Coleby."

In the pause that followed, everybody was conscious of the tightening of the atmosphere. Assault, revolver-firing, the death of a stranger, all seemed relatively unimportant compared with the murder of their host. Most of those present had been, and some still were, suspected of the crime by one or other of the company, but the manner in which the crime had been engineered had remained an insoluble enigma to all. Had the detective solved it ?

" I want you to bring your minds back," said Hogarth, " to the moment when Mr. Coleby left this room and went into the library."

"I hope you are not going to ask us to give you another performance?" inquired MacPherson.

"No, not this time," answered Hogarth. "I have had an account of all your actions. What has been missing all this time has been a complete account of the actions of Mr. Coleby."

"Ay, but that's impossible," remarked MacPherson, "because nobody was in the library with him, and now he canna speak for himself."

"Can't he?" said Hogarth, and walked into the library, closing the door behind him.

The nine guests glued their eyes on the library door, and little chills ran up more than one spine. Rutter's eyes goggled, Snagg seemed to be having difficulty with his swallowing, and Mrs. Dixon, who was among those who had refused to sit at the table, put out her hand to steady herself with the back of a chair.

A moment later she found herself sitting on the chair. Her knees had given way. For from the library came Mr. Coleby's voice, exclaiming:

"Yes—I think—Chambers!"

Brains spun. Time went into reverse. Mrs. Dixon was the only one who moved, and even she did not know she had done it. The others remained in frozen attitudes as the voice of a dead man came to them. But the voice itself was as dead as the man. The tone had a queer grating flatness. . . . It came again:

"Vol X—Swas-Zyri."

And now another strange thing happened, for just as history was repeating itself in the library, it began to repeat itself also in the dining-room. Snagg, terrified out of his wits, made a bolt for the door. This time, however, it was not Leonard who thwarted his desire to escape, but Sergeant Brown. Snagg wilted in the grip of the sergeant's large hands.

"Steady—now, steady," warned Brown, quietly.

"The Lord have mercy on us!" gasped Mr. Dixon.

Religion had never been more ineffective than on this night.

Following a sudden impulse, Leonard turned to glance at Jenny, and found that her eyes were upon him. The silent impulsive union gave them both a strange pleasure.

Rutter made a movement resembling in character that of a restive horse. He was near breaking point. Then the dead, cracked voice from the library came for the third time:

"Theosophy—Theraputae. H'm. No mention of Theramanes. Damn! Then where the devil—? Ah! Of course! Brewer's!"

Rutter lost control.

"How much more of this?" he shouted, and swung round

to the sergeant. "Spoof! D'you think we're children? It's Forsyth—he's got Forsyth in there! That's why the fellow's absent—a trick—a damn' silly trick—well, by God, I'll explode it!"

Before anybody could prevent him he lurched to the library door and seized the knob, but it would not open. He stared dizzily at the empty lock, and then at the floor from where Mr. Coleby had produced the key on returning from the library two minutes before his death. His loosened fingers tightened again round the door-knob, and he shook it violently.

"Open the door, damn you, open the door!" he roared. "You can't fool us! Do you hear? Open the door!"

There was no reply from the inner room. Only a tomblike silence that possessed unnerving qualities of its own. Sergeant Brown, no longer worrying about Snagg who had gone limp, moved quietly in Rutter's direction. In another moment the red-faced bully might go off his head.

Rutter saw him coming, and bellowed at him.

"You keep off! We're not having any more of this! You keep off!" He smashed his fists against the door. "Open it, open it——!"

"*Where IS Brewer's?*" came the response. "*Why can't people leave books where I put them? Ah!*"

Rutter's raised hands were now motionless against the door. Brown, close enough to act if necessary, paused.

"*Here we are! Dying sayings. Theramenes, the Athenian, condemned by Critius to drink hemlock, said as he drank the poison——*"

Leonard, his memory grotesquely revived, was not the only one who seemed to hear the echo of Forsyth's hideous laughter. On the original occasion it had sounded after those words, adding a new note of horror to the moment, and continuing till the clock in the hall, after its preliminary wheeze, had begun striking nine. . . .

Something happened in somebody's throat. Or was it the clock's throat? The familiar wheeze came now from the hall. The clock began to chime. One—two—three—four—five—six—seven—eight—nine. . . . Nine? . . . They waited for it to continue. But it ceased at nine. And, while they waited, the lights went out.

"This," decided the stolid MacPherson to himself, "is mass hallucination. There is no other explanation. Nothing is really happening. A sort of Indian rope-trick. Possibly I am not even here at all. No one is here. Because, even if Forsyth were in the library, imitating Coleby's voice, he could not wipe out three hours of time, making both clocks and electricity

obey him. And even if Coleby himself were not dead, and had been actually speaking from the library . . .

Coleby's furious voice interrupted his reflections.

"Who's put out the lights? What's happening? Who's put out the lights?"

"I wonder," thought MacPherson, "whether—Coleby—really is—in there?"

"Damnation! This door's locked! Who's locked it? Unlock it this moment! Do you hear what I say? Unlock it, unlock it, unlock it!"

Until this moment, Rutter had remained as though pasted to the door. He had not MacPherson's objectivity, and all thought and movement were frozen in him. But as he now heard his own recent exhortation to open the locked door repeated in his dead enemy's voice, something happened inside him, and he leapt back into the arms, as it happened, of Sergeant Brown. Again there was a brief struggle in the dark, though this time with different opponents, and no revolver shot concluded it. It was concluded by something entirely different. Coleby's voice again, now crying something he had not cried before:

"If this is your doing, Rutter!"

Brown had no more trouble with Rutter. The performance in the library had gone beyond the script, and Rutter's last strength was spent.

Then came the last tense moment of that grim drama. A sound was heard at the library door. A crack of light began to show feebly as it slowly opened. The real miracle, it was agreed afterwards, was that no one fainted as the candle light illuminated and developed the figure emerging from the library. But that was largely due to the fact that it was not John Coleby who materialised, but Inspector Hogarth.

Hogarth looked at the dim faces ahead of him with a faint ironical smile. Then, lowering the candle, he glanced down at the carpet, stooped, groped with his free hand, and held up the library key.

He made a sign to Brown. The sergeant left the room, and a few moments later full light returned to Leak Hall.

"Come into the library," said Hogarth, as the sergeant returned.

They straggled in mechanically, impelled by an impetus that did not seem to be their own. Some entered against their will, as they would have entered a haunted room. And on a small table by a window they saw the ghost of John Coleby in the form of a portable gramophone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

QUOD ERAT DEMONSTRANDUM

ADDRESSING a bewildered audience, Hogarth said :

" Well, ladies and gentlemen, I must apologise for having given you all another unpleasant experience, but having arrived at certain conclusions I needed to make a test, and I wanted you in the dining-room while I was making it. I can now give you John Coleby's movements during the period of his absence from the table, having in fact just performed many of them myself.

" But before explaining these movements, and giving his reasons for them, I will tell you how I arrived at my conclusions. They came largely through a process of elimination. The general account I had from you all and the subsequent personal interviews convinced me that although none of you had reason to love Mr. Coleby, while some of you had reason to fear him, not one of you could have performed all the acts that preceded his death, including the culminating act of putting poison into his wine-glass. They were too numerous, and occurred in too many different places, to have been due to any single guest. Of course, I had to consider the question of collaboration, and there was evidence, which I do not propose to enlarge on here, that certain people may have been ready to work together if occasion to do so presented itself. But the occasion did not present itself. I dismissed the question of accomplices.

" Having eliminated all the guests from suspicion, what was left ? I made my deduction, but found neither rhyme nor reason in it. Nor, at first, could I find anything to support it. I seemed to be up against another impossibility. But the peculiar psychology of this case"—his eyes travelled for a moment to the painting of Machiavelli over the fireplace—" and the unusual circumstances of Mr. Coleby's invitations to you all, made me stick to my conviction until I found and followed up two important clues.

" The first was a square frame of dust on that small table by the window, on which is the gramophone. The gramophone was not there when I first entered this study, but it was obvious that something with a square base had recently been on the table and had recently been removed. There is plenty of other dust in this room. I have no doubt that Miss Lacey

will corroborate my impression that the servants have not been allowed to come in here lately to do any cleaning, and that it was kept locked. Mr. Coleby would have had his special reason for that.

"It was when I was interviewing Miss Lacey in her room, which is immediately above this one, that I got my next pointer. I was standing at her window—it's right above this window here by the gramophone—looking down at the moat below. The moat at that part had been in darkness before, but now the moon had just come round an angle of the wall, illuminating the water, and I saw something in the water. Peering down at it, I guessed what it might be, and later sent my sergeant down to fish it out. When he brought it in here, it turned out to be what I had expected—and you see it on the table. The bath had not improved it, but luckily it was still workable, and by a fortunate chance the record on it was not broken, as it must have been had it fallen on hard ground.

"Well, after testing the record I knew that my deduction had been right. Mr. Coleby had had the record made to assist him in his plan. But the gramophone only solved a part of the whole mystery. Other perplexing questions had still to be answered.

"Now, when you are certain of a fact in your mind, you may go to fantastic lengths to prove it. I therefore followed up another clue which was so slight that normally it would have seemed negligible. I will come to that a little later. Let me now tell you what Mr. Coleby did in this room while you were sitting and waiting for his return to the dining-room.

"He had worked everything out to the minutest detail. He must have had dress rehearsals—at night, probably—with watch in hand, for his timing was perfect, and everything depended on his timing. Nothing was left to accident. Not even the apparent failure of his memory when desiring to quote the last words of Theramanes. That assumed memory lapse was his prearranged excuse for leaving you, after he had directed all your thoughts upon the subject of his death.

"When he came into this room, the first thing he did was to bolt the door. He had to ensure himself against the possibility of interruption. One of you might, after a while, have followed him. With the door secured, this would only have corroborated his subsequent assertion that he had been locked in. He had the key himself, of course, but he did not use it because the bolt could be slipped more quietly. It is, you may notice, a new bolt, and it has been well oiled for the occasion. The key—I have tested it—makes more noise.

Then he started the gramophone, which was already in position with the record ready on the table by the window where you now see it."

"May I interrupt you a moment?" said Leonard.

"Yes? What?" asked Hogarth.

"I think you have missed one thing he did—that is, if you started the record just now from the beginning. Did you?" Hogarth nodded. "Well, in that case, the first remarks we heard from him were actually made by himself, because the record did not give them. They went something like his—'Now, then, where's that book? Theramanes. Would it be in Brewer's? Or, no, perhaps in Chambers—yes, I think in Chambers.' I can't vouch for the words exactly," he added, with a faint smile, "because I haven't the perfect memory of Mr. Forsyth, but they were along those lines."

Hogarth replied, appreciatively, "Your memory is good enough, Mr. Boyd. As you say, the record does not contain that. Mr. Coleby would have needed time to get the gramophone going, and his voice would also be useful to cover the slight possibility that the bolt might be heard if slid in silence. So, then, he began by using his own voice, and then let the record deputize for him while he did other things."

"And I can tell you something else about that record," put in MacPherson. "He didn't have to use the whole of it, for that last bit, when he was shouting to Mr. Rutter, wasn't it, as ye might say, in the original text. We all heard it just now for the first time."

"Well, that's interesting, too," answered Hogarth, "for it all goes to prove how thorough Mr. Coleby was. If his timing was wrong, he had a bit on the record in hand to play with. But he completed his performance so quickly and smoothly that he did not need it."

"Now, having started the gramophone, he—well, this part I will show you."

He crossed the room from the gramophone to the opposite wall, the wall that was almost completely obscured by books. He took a light brown covered book from a shelf about four feet from the floor. Inserting his hand in the narrow aperture, he kept it there for a second or two, and then withdrew it, and as he did so the section of the bookcase of which this shelf formed the top swung inwards, like a door. Through the oblong space behind the section was revealed a view of the hall.

"Bless my soul!" murmured the Reverend Eldred Dixon.

"I'm damned!" muttered Rutter.

"And how did you find *that* out?" exclaimed MacPherson.

"By following up the fantastic clue which I mentioned two

or three minutes ago," answered Hogarth. He held up the light brown volume. "I had noticed that this book was slightly out of position on the shelf, and the title had vaguely attracted me. *Secret Hiding Places*, by Granville Squiers. It had entered my sub-conscious mind, and it came out again while I was groping for clues, however fragile, to complete my theory. Although this one book was out of position, all the others, as you may see, were in perfect alignment. I wondered whether it had been recently moved. It occurred to me that, just as John Coleby's books were neat, so might be his mind—providing the one flaw, perhaps, in his subtlety. It would certainly be appropriate if a book dealing with secrets proved the key to another secret outside its covers. Moreover, the book was in the wall between the library and the hall. I tested the mad notion—with the result that you see."

Peter interposed.

"But—look here!" he exclaimed, incredulously. "Do you mean to tell me that my uncle went to the lengths of having the wall fixed like that especially for—to-night?"

Hogarth shook his head.

"No, I don't mean that," he answered. "Your uncle went to astonishingly elaborate trouble, but it was not quite as elaborate as that. This does not mean that a man of his peculiar nature, and with a compelling idea in his head, might not have gone to such lengths if the idea had occurred to him and had become necessary—and if, of course, it could have been carried out as secretly, say, as having a gramophone record made. But there was no necessity, for the thing was already done. Leak Hall is an old house, and hundreds of old houses in this country—as *Secret Hiding Places* will tell you—still possess their places of concealment and devices for escape—sliding panels, priests' holes, secret passages and so forth. It is very possible that John Coleby, who seems to have been alone in his knowledge of this wall's secret, derived his whole idea from the fact of it—from the chance it offered him. Yes," he added, reflectively, "it may have been the basis of his whole conception." Suddenly he snapped his fingers. "Am I wrong? Was he the only person who knew of it?"

"What else is in your mind?" asked Leonard.

"His father!" replied Hogarth. "Adam Coleby! I believe Adam Coleby knew everything from the word go! Knew everything, and couldn't speak! And—being of the same breed—wouldn't have spoken even if he could!"

He recalled his short unsatisfactory interview with Adam Coleby, and in the little silence that followed, the strange,

uncanny personality of the old man upstairs filled the room.

Hogarth continued :

"After that, the rest was easy. While the gramophone gave you all the belief that Mr. Coleby was still in the library, he was out of it, probably emerging into the hall just after you, Mr. Boyd, and Mr. Snagg had returned to the dining-room after momentarily leaving it. He switched off the lights, wiping off his finger-prints afterwards—maybe with Mr. Rutter's handkerchief. For, before returning to the library, he paid a rapid visit to the cloakroom to spread further confusion around and to provide red herrings of suspicion. He took Mr. Rutter's handkerchief and threw it down near a chair, which he quietly overturned. He placed in Mr. Dixon's overcoat pocket a stamped envelope similar in character to the one he had himself received from his anonymous correspondent——"

"That would be Mr. Forsyth, I'm thinking," interposed MacPherson.

"You are entitled to your opinion," retorted Hogarth, rather shortly. "He found a photograph in the overcoat pocket of Mr. Boyd, and tore it in two—to supply Mr. Boyd with a motive for anger. He sprinkled some of Miss Lacey's scent in the vicinity of the main electric switches——"

"How rotten!" exclaimed Phyllis.

"And then he returned to the library, closed the bookcase"—Hogarth swung the bookcase back into position as he spoke—"and stopped the gramophone."

"Suppose one of the servants had come up and caught him?" said Peter.

"In that case," replied Hogarth, obviously, "he would have been caught. But the instructions to the servants were that, after the wine-glasses had been filled for the last time, that ended their duties above-stairs until the meal was over. A greater risk was that one of you would leave the dining-room. But he trusted to the record to hold you. His final act, before unbolting the library door and rejoining you in simulated anger, was to drop the gramophone out of the window into the moat, of course closing the window and drawing the curtain across it afterwards. You believed that when he returned to the dining-room he picked the key up from the floor. He no more did that than I did myself just now. He had the key in his hand before he stooped—the simplest of tricks."

"But why—why—all this?" stammered Mr. Dixon, his weak eyes wide with wonder.

"Just to make a little more trouble in a troubled world,"

replied Hogarth, with a shrug. "Trouble-making was clearly one of his hobbies. He decided to go on with it to the very end—to conclude, as it were, with a *grand finale*. The darkness, of course, was to give you all an opportunity——"

"Which none of us took!" interrupted MacPherson.

"Which none of you took," agreed Hogarth, "but which nevertheless it might be difficult to prove afterwards that none of you took."

"Er—then—er—who did poison him?" gulped Mr. Dixon.

"But surely, by now, you have deduced that?" answered Hogarth. "Mr. Coleby poisoned himself. I think we may find that he took a tablet or cachet—yes, and that may be one thing more he did in here just before he rejoined you."

The silence lasted a minute. Then Leonard asked, quietly, "Why?"

"Ah—why?" repeated Hogarth, slowly. "Why? Yes, that was the biggest riddle of all. Why should Mr. Coleby poison himself? Well, I can claim no credit for having solved that poser. The credit is due to Dr. Dawson, who gave me the solution over the telephone just before I called you in from the drawing-room. Dr. Dawson was puzzled over Mr. Coleby's condition, and after a long examination he went off—without my knowledge—to see Dr. Griffiths, who had been Mr. Coleby's medical adviser."

"Ay, Miss Lacey tried to telephone to him, but he was out," nodded MacPherson.

"Yes, but when Dr. Dawson called, he was in," said Hogarth, "and after the situation was explained to him, Dr. Griffiths very rightly revealed certain particulars regarding Mr. Coleby's last visit to him. Mr. Coleby was threatened with his father's complaint—Locomotor Ataxia. And he lacked his father's patience to await the end."

He paused, while this sank in. It was Jenny who voiced a thought that was coming to many.

"But—Mr. Hogarth," she exclaimed. "That look on his face—we all saw it—that look of consternation——!"

"I think, Miss MacPherson, I can explain that," answered Hogarth, gently. "Suicide is generally committed in private. There are no witnesses. It is only when it is done in public—on such very rare occasions—that, when the poison actually begins to work—when the sudden full realisation dawns of what one has done and what cannot now be retracted—the effect of this is seen by other eyes. The terrible moment is swiftly over—but it comes."

All understood, and for an instant there was sympathy. But Peter Coleby quickly stamped upon it.

"He might have brought one of us to a more terrible moment!" he cried. "At the end of a hangman's rope!"

Hogarth shook his head. "I think not," he said. "In less than three hours we have solved your uncle's riddle. No one will excuse him for having set it, but perhaps he was not such a fool as to imagine that the police were fools, either? He did not concentrate suspicion on any particular person. We might call it—perhaps—a very misguided man's last little joke?"

The clock in the hall wheezed, and struck the quarter.

"Yes—but explain *that*!" exclaimed Peter. "The last time that damned clock struck, it struck *nine*!"

Hogarth answered innocently, "Did it? Are you sure? Perhaps you miscounted?"

Hogarth was a brave man, but—as he admitted later to Sergeant Brown—he lacked the courage at that moment to confess that, when he had been in the hall, the imp of the man whose actions he was checking had got inside him and he had put the clock back three hours. That had been *his* little joke.

CHAPTER THIRTY

MILESTONES

THE POLICE had gone, and all the guests, saving three had departed. In the pleasant quietude that followed the evening's shattering events, Peter had asked Leonard and the MacPhersons to remain while he searched for his uncle's will. He had found it, and had discovered to his astonishment that he had been left the house and a considerable sum of money. But the bequest had been accompanied by the following characteristic comment: "My father owns enough for his modest needs, my housekeeper, I am sure, will have no difficulty in securing another place and will therefore still be cared for by the living, so it has to be my nephew or a Cats' Home—and of the two I am even less partial to cats."

"John Coleby could never do anything without a sting in it, I'm thinking," remarked MacPherson.

"I shan't worry about that!" answered Peter, unable to dwell on anything but what this meant to his future. "I shall pay him back by turning this old house into a place fit to live in—eh, Phyllis?"

"I can't believe it," murmured Phyllis. "Do you think we can?"

"We? Yes! I couldn't do it alone," replied Peter, "but

together we'll wipe out the shadows ! Before long, you'll see, no one will recognise Leak Hall—the spirit of it ! ”

Phyllis nodded gravely.

“ But what about Miss Lacey ? ” she asked. “ And—and— ”

“ Good Lord, we're not going to turn *them* out ! ” exclaimed Peter. “ The old man will have to stay—and, look here, we'll do all we can for him. And Miss Lacey, too, if she wants to. ”

“ Let's try and make her want to, ” said Phyllis. “ It's funny—I'm a bit giddy—but I feel as if I've got something real to do, at last ! ”

Peter squeezed her hand, then turned to Leonard.

“ I say ! What about you ? I still don't know anything about you, you know, or where you're staying. Would you like a shake-down here for the night ? ”

Leonard hesitated, then shook his head.

“ No, I'll be getting back, ” he replied.

MacPherson gave him a shrewd glance.

“ Have ye got a conveyance ? ” he inquired. “ If not, mebbe we could gi'e you a lift ? ”

“ That's very good of you, ” answered Leonard, this time without hesitation.

“ Well, just as you think, ” said Peter, “ but don't forget, you've had a knock, and you'd have been welcome. ”

“ I'm O.K.—don't worry about me, ” said Leonard, and held out his hand. “ Thanks. ”

Peter looked at him curiously as they shook.

“ You know how to keep a secret, don't you ? ” he said.

“ Sure, ” smiled Leonard. “ You've learned quite as many to-night as are good for you. Good-night to you both. Good luck. ”

“ Good-night, ” they called back, and the last three guests went out to the car.

It was a small saloon. Jenny took the driver's seat, and Leonard and MacPherson got in behind. Jenny pressed the self-starter, and waited. They heard the front door close across the moat.

“ Where to ? ” asked Jenny.

“ Which way are you going ? ” said Leonard.

“ The way you're going, ” answered Jenny, “ so where is that ? ”

“ I'm sleeping at Ricester Station Hotel. ”

“ And for why ? ”

“ Because I've nowhere else ! ”

“ 'Tis a sorry hotel, that, ” said Jenny. “ Why didn't you stay at Leak Hall, as they asked you ? ”

"Because they've got quite enough to think about, without worrying over me," he replied.

MacPherson's voice sounded beside him. "And, if I'm not being too curious, Mr. Boyd, was it for the same reason that ye didna tell Mr. Peter Coleby who ye were?"

Leonard thought for a moment, then nodded. The MacPhersons were very friendly people. He felt curiously at home with them.

"But you told the inspector?" queried MacPherson.

"Oh, sure!"

"And you're telling us?"

"Sure, he's telling us," said Jenny over her shoulder, half-mocking.

Leonard smiled. Well, why not? "I'm Peter's illegitimate cousin. They're a nice couple, and they're trying to wipe out unhappy memories. It wouldn't help them to hear another of John Coleby's sins."

After a little silence, Jenny said, "But you might help them?"

He shook his head. "No, Miss MacPherson. My place isn't here. It's in what I understand are called those wide open spaces, among cattle and sheep. I followed an impulse—but it was a mistake ever to leave them."

"I expect they're good company, Mr. Boyd. And so what will you be doing when you wake up to-morrow at the station hotel?"

"Taking the first boat back to Australia," he answered.

The engine was still purring softly, but the wheels had not yet revolved. A ray of light came from the front door, and Phyllis's voice called out:

"What's the matter? Is something wrong?"

"No, we're just off," Jenny called back, and let in the clutch.

The car slid forward. Leak Hall receded into the shadows. Suddenly Leonard exclaimed, "Say, is this the way to Ricester?"

"No, it's the way to Leverage," answered Jenny, "and we've a spare room."

He stared at the back of her dark brown hair.

"But——" he began.

"Mr. Boyd!" she interrupted. "Australia's a long way, and life's a long while, so I canna see the hurry! And please to remember you've a bandage roond your head!"

MacPherson chuckled.

"I've known Jenny longer than you have, Mr. Boyd," he said, "so take my advice and save your breath."

"And close your eyes," added Jenny. "It's the hospital nurse speaking."

He accepted the advice of both. All at once, life had become very peaceful. And because his eyes were closed he did not see a tall, theatrical figure standing by a milestone as the car sped by.

The figure stared after the car vaguely, then turned back to the milestone, and addressed it.

"To what base uses may we return, Horatio! Why may not imagination trace the noble dust of Alexander till he find it stopping a bung-hole? . . . H'm. . . . H'm. . . . As thus Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth into dust, the dust is earth, of earth we make loam; and why, of that loam whereto he was converted, might they not stop a beer-barrel?"

He sat down on the milestone and laughed. What was all the pother about? Success, failure—love, hate—life, death—Shakespeare exploded them all!

THE END

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